

October 2023

Television

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TO WATCH

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Convention 2023

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From the CEO



When the history of the RTS is written, I have no doubt that the Cambridge Convention 2023, “Too much to watch”, will be seen as one of the Society’s

highlights. There have been many memorable Cambridges, but few can compare with last month’s heady event; for the sheer range of speakers and topics, it was in a class of its own.

There were broadcasters, streamers, influencers, Hollywood royalty and those working at the leading edge of

technology. The discussion on artificial intelligence was mesmerising.

So, too, was listening to James Corden, who sounded genuinely thrilled to be back in the UK after hosting almost 1,100 editions of *The Late Late Show*.

Not, of course, forgetting Piers Morgan and Krishnan Guru-Murthy, whose heated debate on impartiality was the most popular session online.

Heartfelt thanks to Convention Chair and Channel 4 CEO Alex Mahon, who masterminded the event with such energy and intellectual rigour. Thanks also to the Convention Committee and

the talented producers who brought such consistency to the sessions.

Thanks to all our sponsors and to all of you for being there.

I was delighted to see so many of our bursary students at Cambridge.

Inside this bumper issue of *Television* we have reports of all 16 sessions. I hope you enjoy reading them.

Theresa Wise

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OUR FRIEND IN THE NORTH WEST



Rope Ladder Fiction

The future of the RTS, especially in the regions, is about ensuring that it has a relevance and a clear purpose. And this must be a real purpose for all – from new recruits to industry heavyweights. We need events that inspire, challenge and make us question the direction of travel for our sector, while ensuring there are opportunities to make new connections and unexpected partnerships.

Since the pandemic, it is true that we have all been grappling with the best forum to have conversation and debate and thinking about the spaces and places in which we come together.

As the industry faces existential challenges on several fronts, how do we share ideas collectively, and not within a narrow bubble? How do we connect with creatives in aligned fields such as gaming, sports, education, film, and the arts more broadly?

What might be the collegiate environment where we can come together, exchange ideas, consider best practice and circle the potential green shoots that might exist in our sector? As the world changes at pace, as an organisation our relevance is key.

This summer, Manchester witnessed Aviva Studios, home of Factory International, open its doors, on the old Granada Studios' Quay Street site. At the same time, the Manchester International Festival hosted a VR event, Kagami, in the restored Versa Manchester Studios.

It felt truly inspiring to have creativity bubbling in the city and to know that, beneath our feet, was the history of a broadcasting institution. The key to how we might network in

What is the best setting for creative conversations?
Cameron Roach is inspired by the fabled Granada canteen

future may be in the history of the Quay Street studios.

Certainly, a space that the RTS can be inspired by, and is often celebrated – indeed, some might say was notorious – is the Granada canteen. Reminiscing in 2016, producer/director Jon Woods described the canteen as the “heart of the building”; there was a sense that you could meet anyone there; and a conversation could be had with anyone, regardless of their department or grade.

Earlier in the year, at the RTS North West annual Tony Wilson Memorial Lecture, network chief David Liddiment celebrated the success and innovation that blossomed under the Granada producer-broadcaster model at Quay Street. In his talk, David captured the easy creative flow of conversation and opportunity that existed in the building.

There was hierarchy, but there was also a cross-pollination of ideas and collective pursuit of excellence; ideas

were not siloed in entertainment or comedy but were shared and built on. For instance, an editor might make their way from light entertainment to drama, and the programmes that emerged would benefit from this lateral move. We are now so segregated, there is little opportunity to share ideas, be collegiate and encourage a collective success.

I'm proposing that our events should carry the atmosphere of the Granada canteen, with the opportunity to strike up a conversation with anyone, no matter what their rank or in which genre they work. Their common ground must be sharing a passion for entertaining audiences and an excitement for TV and the opportunities it holds.

As the industry becomes increasingly siloed, there is a greater need to come together in spaces that are not political, commercial or segregated in any way. We need to have totally open access. We need a canteen mentality.

It was terrific to be reminded recently by Sue Johnston, as *The Royle Family* celebrated its 25th anniversary, that it was at the RTS North West Awards that Caroline Aherne first approached Ricky Tomlinson, and announced with certainty that he would be playing her dad, and Sue would be playing her mum.

This is exactly the type of conversation we all would want to encourage more of. The RTS can maintain its relevance if our events bring people together, to celebrate our craft and offer potential and hope for the future.

Anyone for a food fight? ■

Cameron Roach is Chair of RTS North West and runs Manchester-based independent Rope Ladder Fiction.



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TV diary

As I write this, I am “officially” just three weeks and one day into my new role as CEO of The Film and TV Charity. I say “officially” because I was already performing some of the public functions back in August at the Edinburgh Television Festival.

I have not been able to gently ease myself into the job, having taken over at a time when the industry is in crisis and the role of the charity is more important than ever.

When I was approached to write this diary, I hesitated. But I agreed to write it for one reason – the same reason I agreed to represent the charity at Edinburgh before I had started the job.

That is because there is a need to help as many people in the TV and film industry as possible who are suffering financial hardship.

I am on a mission to raise the profile of the charity and encourage as many people as possible to donate so we can help our colleagues in need.

■ **Two days before I officially start at the charity, the great icon of black British cinema, Sir Horace Ové, dies. I receive phonecalls and messages from black film-makers wanting to talk about the trailblazer who was responsible for the first feature film by a black British director.**

A consistent theme that comes up in the conversations is: what is the industry going to do to remember him?

■ People working in the UK film and TV industry are caught in a perfect



Paul Hampartsoumian

Marcus Ryder survives a baptism of fire as he begins a new job helping TV workers in need

storm. The combination of an advertising downturn – causing a commissioning slowdown – with a BBC licence-fee freeze and the impact of the US actors’ and writers’ strikes – has put many major productions in the UK on hold. This is all happening in the midst of the cost of living crisis. So applications for our hardship grants have rocketed.

For the many freelancers who work in our industry the crisis is particularly acute.

■ **“Where did all the money go?” I agreed to represent The Film and TV Charity at the Edinburgh TV Festival because, by that point, the Charity already knew things were looking bad and we desperately needed to raise more money.**

They thought that getting me to meet the different industry bodies and have a CEO speak on panel discussions would help to raise more

donations. They were right. Broadcasters, streamers, indies – big and small – and individuals all rose to the challenge. By the end of the festival, we had raised over £260,000.

■ **“What happens when the money runs out?” I had just started at the charity and I was faced with an existential crisis. At the rate we were giving out money our grant pot would be empty by the end of November.**

I didn’t want to return to our funders, (or the charity’s trustees) and ask for more money until we had a plan, otherwise we would simply be putting off the inevitable – running out of money in December instead of November. We needed a long-term strategy.

■ **The team came to the rescue. From delivering a Horace Ové remembrance event in less than a week to creating a new grants scheme and delivering it, I have learnt that my new colleagues at the charity are nothing if not agile.**

■ **When I started at The Film and TV Charity someone had left a note on my desk. It said: “There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream to find out why they’re falling in.”**

I have no idea who left it there.

But after we get through this crisis, I hope my next diary will be about how we stop people “falling into the river”; not just asking for your help to pull them out.

Marcus Ryder is CEO of The Film and TV Charity.



The generational time bomb

Introducing the first session of the Convention, Cambridge Chair and Channel 4 CEO, Alex Mahon, posed a stark question: “Is there simply too much content?”

And then a follow-up – “And with content as king, hasn’t distribution now become King Kong?” – before offering some typically honest answers.

“We’ve been in a frantic race for eyeballs, advertising dollars and subscription cash, and that race, like some kind of gigantic global grand prix, has been driven by hubristic spending on video creation.

“Now... we are coming to terms with the reality that this model simply doesn’t work in the ways that we want it to. The uncontrolled proliferation and commodification of content has made content effectively limitless, but it’s also why we feel like there’s too much to watch and sometimes nothing to watch, and why consumers are flipping between streamers like we

Alex Mahon tells the UK TV sector that it is fighting for its life

used to flip between the channels.

“We see every day that there’s not enough money, there aren’t enough eyeballs and there’s too much video.”

Mahon added: “Our race is coming to a juddering halt”, calling for a “great restart”.

New Channel 4 research (see box on page 11) presented a generally optimistic picture of viewer attitudes for the PSBs, but, said Mahon: “We have to urgently recognise that those of us who sit in the UK PSBs are sitting on a generational time bomb.”

She continued: “PSBs would be dangerously complacent to rely on younger viewers naturally migrating to traditional viewing as they put more candles on their birthday cakes... we have to go hunting for them.”

Mahon drew two main conclusions from the research: “One is that we are fighting for our business lives and, two, is that we may just about be able to win that fight.

“People, even young British people, feel the need for what our content can bring them and, if we make content that they can trust, that is salient, relevant and informative, then they [will] want it more than other content.”

Young people, though, need to be able to find that content. Mahon stressed: “We will have to change your ways of distributing content – it might mean more proactive dating between PSBs and social platforms... it might even need some cross-species meeting.”

British PSBs, she argued, need to present a “united front, a combined effort, to ensure that adequate prominence legislation is passed and passed very soon.

“That’s why, through our jointly owned company Everyone TV, we’ve just announced Freely, a service that



Richard Kendal



Alex Mahon,
Channel 4

Richard Kendal

will ensure broadband-only homes can get free access to live PSB TV, not just VoD, in the streaming age.

“We need to be sure that valuable and valued British content, which we believe is already relevant to our young people, is also prevalent for them. We can’t expect them to happen upon it.”

Mahon called on a series of experts to offer their thoughts on how consumers could best surf the surfeit of video across ever-increasing platforms to find the standout content and, just as importantly, views that challenged rather than echoed their beliefs.

Behavioural scientist Lea Karam identified four factors behind video consumption: the fear of missing out; decision paralysis; whether you are a maximiser or a satisfier; and filter bubbles and echo chambers.

She explained that consumers can be “anchored way too much in their recent biases [by] algorithmic content”.

Ronan Harris from Snap (the parent company of Snapchat) said that people

come to the platform to “engage with their real friends and family, and often that’s visual communication”.

The content, he added, is “culturally relevant... about the community you’re a part of, and it gives you that happy, positive feeling. I think that results in people wanting to spend more time and creates the positive engagement we see for brands and advertisers.”

Karam warned of the dangers of AI-generated content that consumers return to repeatedly, which becomes their default bias and effectively an echo chamber for their own views. She said: “We need to work hard towards getting [consumers]... to explore new topics and content.”

The behavioural scientist added: “A lot of boys watch content that comes to them that is very sexist, Andrew Tate-type content, and they are constantly bombarded with those types of influencers.

“It’s really important to regulate the algorithm, and it’s also really important ▶

A nation of video addicts?

- People watch 324 minutes (5 hours, 24 minutes) of video daily
- Broadcaster and SVoD libraries contain 170,000 hours of TV
- There are 800 million videos on YouTube
- As much as 60% of the content watched by young viewers is chosen by algorithms
- 16- to 34-year-olds spend seven hours a day on social media, 2.5 hours of which is spent watching videos
- They watch just 33 minutes of live TV, a quarter of the amount their parents watch
- Nearly two-thirds of their daily TV watching is with subscription content.

Mahon on Russell Brand

'The allegations made against Russell Brand are horrendous and, as the CEO of Channel 4 and as a woman in our industry, I found the behaviour described in *Dispatches*, and *The Sunday Times* and *The Times* articles disgusting and saddening.

'The allegations, of course, need to be followed up further and we and the BBC and Banijay are busy investigating. Channel 4 has invited anyone who knows about this behaviour to come to us, we've written to all our suppliers to say the same and we've set up a process for people to contact us anonymously if they need to.

'They're not empty words and gestures from all of us; they are what is meant by our duty of care. We will seek to find out who knew, who was told what, and what was or wasn't referred up.

'But what is clear to me is that terrible behaviour towards women was historically tolerated in our industry. The clips we've seen as well provide a rather shocking jolt when one realises that what appeared on air [was] not that long ago.

'The behaviour is less prevalent now, but it's still a problem and it's something that we must all confront. There is still change that needs to come and Channel 4 along with those others are at the forefront of that change.'

'TERRIBLE BEHAVIOUR TOWARDS WOMEN WAS HISTORICALLY TOLERATED IN OUR INDUSTRY'



Angela Jain, ITV Studios

Richard Kendal

► for those platforms to [prioritise] discovery pages... if they want to do something for the good of the world."

Harris added: "That's how our platform is structured: the first part of video content that you come across is the friends and family content and the stuff that you subscribe to, then it's to discover, so stories, say, from Channel 4 about *The Great British Bake Off* or from the BBC about *EastEnders*... and then the third step is where you go into more of the entertainment video formats."

ITV Studios' Angela Jain said: "There is too much TV to watch... but that's a bit like saying there are too many books and too much art. I wouldn't want to diminish the amount of voices there are out there creating new content.

"The challenge is about how you get noticed when there's so much vying for our collective attention."

In Jain's factual genre, asked Mahon, does this mean that content has to become more "salacious"?

No, said Jain, although programme-makers have to respond to market trends, which currently favour reality shows over panel shows and quizzes.

The best shows, she added, tend to be the result of a very British culture of "creative collaboration, between the buyer, the commissioner and us the producer".

But, asked Mahon, is there a danger that smaller UK PSBs will be left behind, especially by younger viewers?

"[Children] have no particular loyalty to anywhere – they will chase the content where they can find it. That doesn't mean that all is lost for PSBs – it's about amplifying what [they] do really well: trustworthiness and the way they are able to curate and create a brand identity for bringing kids in.

"You have to work really hard to talk to them where they are and persuade them that something you've got to say, they're going to enjoy, learn from, be excited by and, more importantly, want to share with their peer group, because they are going to be the biggest advocates of making your show a success."

Mahon asked: "For your children, what do you worry about the most?"

Jain said: "It's what Lea was talking about, that they will just be fed what



Pedro Pina, YouTube

Richard Kendall

they already know and that voyage of discovery will disappear.”

YouTube executive Pedro Pina admitted that there was “a lot of content”, but, more importantly, he said, is that: “There’s a lot more diverse content than ever existed before.

“I’m pretty sure my profile is different from yours. The beauty of platforms like YouTube... is that we can provide the audience with what they want. Everyone who has a camera can produce content.

“Because of all the content needed to be created in order to address your profile, which is different from mine and different from everyone in this room, we just created a massive revolution of creativity in this country.” ■

Session One, ‘Too much to watch’, was introduced and chaired by Channel 4 CEO Alex Mahon, and featured: Ronan Harris, President EMEA, Snap; Angela Jain, Director of Unscripted UK, ITV Studios; Lea Karam, Consulting Director, Behave, Total Media; and Pedro Pina, Vice-President, YouTube EMEA. The producer was Sacha Khari. Report by Matthew Bell.



Lea Karam, Total Media



Ronan Harris, Snap

Both pictures: Richard Kendall

Why we watch what we watch

Channel 4 studied patterns of consumption across the UK. It interviewed people about their feelings and worked with behavioural psychologists to understand their motivations.

The results were merged with Barb data to produce new insights into how British people watch video in 2023:

- Video is the default leisure activity for most people in the UK
- Short form is 25% of total video for older people; 45% for younger people
- Consumers feel anxious about video overload; many people associate their short-form social media consumption with feeling a lack of control
- When the content they get is algorithmically served rather than selected, people say they feel emotionally out of control – they report a sense that their lives have been encroached upon

■ Where short film is intentionally sought out and when it serves a purpose, then the payoff is much more positive

■ People welcome the fact that TV content is often watched with others – it brings a sense of community and cultural connection

■ British audiences welcome PSB content – they know that these programmes are made for them and with care

■ Of the top 40 programmes overall last year, there is only one streamer show (*Clarkson’s Farm*) – and that was based on talent developed by the PSBs

■ Of the top 40 shows for young people, however, 14 are from streamers

■ Young people have a weaker affinity for, and recognition of, the PSB brands. This is partly due to their stage in life but also because their age group has different brand priorities.



The BBC DG discusses why the UK needs to be a cultural superpower – and the fallout from the allegations against Russell Brand

UK keynote: Tim Davie

Another week, another BBC media storm. As allegations of rape and other forms of sexual abuse emerged against Russell Brand, a former Radio 2 and Radio 6 Music presenter who resigned in 2008 following a prank phonecall to actor Andrew Sachs, the BBC's Director-General, Tim Davie, once again found himself having to defend the corporation's culture.

Two days before his Cambridge appearance, the DG had announced that an internal inquiry would examine any complaints made about Brand during his time at the BBC. "This is not an issue that we can put down as wholly historic. There is an important and healthy dialogue to have around these deep imbalances of power," he said.

"High-adrenaline environments", be it TV and radio production or City trading rooms or even hospital operating theatres all appeared to be breeding grounds for sexual predators, he continued. It was essential that the BBC had a "flawless whistle-blowing process" and "very, very rigorous support systems" for staff who were affected; trust in internal processes was vital.

"There have been problems, deep problems with misogyny, abuse of power... We have to be utterly vigilant and unaccepting of it... and trust that, when information is brought forward, it is treated very seriously. Our record recently has been very transparent... There's never a sense that we want to cover it up."

But was enough done back in 2008, when the so-called Sachsgate incident

occurred? This, coincidentally, was a few weeks after Davie began work as the BBC's Head of Audio. "With hindsight, you can always reflect on whether there were things we could have looked at," he replied. "We did a good job on that review."

The DG added: "I am proud of our culture. When I go around the BBC, we are having profound conversations and we have been for years. [But] are we getting it right in ensuring there are no abuses of power and that people behave flawlessly in terms of respect for each other, and kindness?"

Davie's interviewer, business journalist Kate Bulkley, pressed him on the fact that there was also an investigation into allegations of sexual misconduct against newsreader Huw Edwards.

"That's why I say you can't be complacent," responded Davie. "We've got

to be careful we don't prejudge all these investigations. I say that with caution because my instinct is that there are significant problems. What I've seen is significant progress."

Turning to the wider subject of future-proofing the BBC at a time of what feels like permanent disruption, Davie highlighted the announcement of Freely, the new broadband-delivered streaming service from Everyone TV (formerly Digital UK), due to launch in the New Year.

Was the service aimed at ensuring that PSBs have prominence in an online world? "Prominence is critical," agreed Davie. "We're at a critical point on public service broadcasting where we have to choose and intervene and ask, 'What are we going to create, based on the environment we've heard brilliantly articulated this morning, [where young people have no loyalty to the BBC]?"

He continued: "The simple thing about Freely is we know that, by about 2030, most people will be using the internet as their primary connection. It's probably about 15% now... I think we're miles away from any kind of switchover." Davie wanted to make sure that households "who are less attuned to digital change" aren't left behind. Hence Freely, which aims to be "a flawless platform providing live television, catch-up TV and SVoD".

He added: "Freely's got a really good chance because it's got all the public service broadcasters together.... I think this is going to be a fight. You're never going to own the whole market. Loads of people want to own the front of your television. Having our public service broadcasters as one player in the game for a big section of society is well worth investing in."

Davie urged the Government to get on with its Media Bill. He emphasised that it was the BBC's role to chase the audience and not the market by backing distinctive programmes such as *Happy Valley* and *Wild Isles*, two of the most popular shows of the past year. He was pleased with how much BBC drama was being watched online, singling out *The Sixth Commandment*.

Regarding his "value for all" strategy, Davie listed four priorities: get the content right; ensure "you are joined up and using online flawlessly";



Richard Kendall

maintaining impartiality in the face of enormous pressure; and correct use of the BBC's commercial income.

As for future strategy, said the DG, the world was moving so fast, the BBC had its thinking cap on. One concern was safeguarding the prominence and delivery of public service news. He explained: "The BBC has a rich heritage of innovation... we've got to make some choices about how we innovate to stay relevant.... The biggest choice is where your editorial focus is."

Would this involve more cuts? It seemed not: "We've made some changes in local radio and cut the budget and migrated money into digital services. That was the right decision [although] it's been incredibly difficult."

On the commercial front, Davie said the BBC had to ensure that BBC Studios' content supply was "absolutely vibrant".

What, though, was the future of the licence fee? Surely, it was a busted flush, suggested Bulkley. "Funding models are absolutely secondary,"

**'WE WILL
DOUBLE
COMMERCIAL
REVENUES IN
THE NEXT FEW
YEARS... WE HAVE
DONE IT BEFORE'**

Davie said. "As a board, we've set out very clear principles. We believe in universal funding. We believe in the independence of the BBC. I don't believe you can separate the funding mechanism from the editorial content.

"If we move to a radically different funding model [a review of the licence fee is underway at DCMS], our backing is for a universal service that preserves our independence. I think the mechanics of that are secondary. The licence fee works well at the moment."

With media inflation showing no sign of abating, Davie said the BBC needed capital and investment. Growing the BBC's commercial activities was therefore essential. Acquiring more stakes in indies was not ruled out. "ITV Studios, BBC Studios should be incredibly proud. Where would those businesses be if UK entities had not worked with them as creative partners?"

The BBC's commercial revenues had doubled in recent years. There was no reason why "we can't do that again". On-demand services in the US were being looked at. There was enormous potential. "We're not trying to take over the world, but do good things."

He was "healthily paranoid" regarding Netflix taking BBC talent. "Life is not just about the cash. Surely, it's about what our legacy is.... In some ways, the biggest achievement is to get the top people in the industry working at the BBC. I've got a battle on my hands to keep talent. One of the areas I'm working on is people who are brilliant at engineering code."

The BBC didn't need all of people's time but if it was habitually where people go for trusted content, it would be fulfilling its purpose, but he conceded that the BBC and all the UK PSBs were "in a massive fight for relevance".

Were the culture secretary to grant him one wish, what would it be? To have a growth plan for the creative industries. "There is enormous growth to be had," said Davie. "We can generate economic growth that has a cultural and social return." ■

In Session Two: 'UK keynote: Tim Davie', the BBC Director-General was in conversation with journalist Kate Bulkley. The session was produced by Sue Robertson. Report by Steve Clarke.

Scale only gets you so far

Local content is king
because it is a strong
driver of audience
engagement



Local content offers a way forward for UK broadcasters and producers – in television, big is not always best. In the “new era of media”, claimed media cartographer Evan Shapiro during an effervescent presentation: “The user is in complete control of what they’re watching.”

Focusing on the big tech players that dominate his map of the most valuable media and tech companies, he said: “You can’t beat them at scale. In fact, in many cases, you have to work with them and compete with them simultaneously... you have to both bear-hug them and keep them at arm’s length.

“If you think you’re going to be able to survive in a world where you need to attract the next generation of consumers without working with YouTube, the largest video platform and television channel on the face of the Earth..., you’re out of your goddamn minds.”

Fortunately for TV producers, he continued: “Content is still king. Yes, big tech will be involved in probably all our content... but they need you

just as much as you need them. They cannot survive by just being pipes: your intellectual property is the blood in their veins. You need to swagger when you walk into the room – they need you.”

Offering a parallel between his health and that of TV, he continued: “I’ve had a terrific year... I’m probably at the peak of my game and then, about two months ago, I was diagnosed with cancer.”

During the Covid pandemic, he said, media companies thought that they, too, were “at the peak of their game – lockdown had created a false sense of security. It created this opportunity to get these streaming services that they were all launching [to the point of] success very quickly, but, at the heart of the models... there was cancer in the system.

“My cancer, follicular lymphoma, is incredibly manageable. I will live my full lifespan. [Likewise], everything that ails our media ecosystem is manageable, but you have to understand the world changed four years ago and now we have to catch up with it...”



From left: Evan Shapiro, Claire Enders, Kamal Ahmed, Maria Kyriacou and Simon Pitts

Richard Kendall

“We need treatment now, not later. We are not coming to a new era; we are there already. And the new users between the ages of five and 25 are dictating the rate of change, which is now constant.

“In the new user-centric video era, video, social, audio and gaming are not silos – the consumer sees them all coming through the same screen... the fastest way to lose control of your media ecosystem is to cede control of your consumers... to big tech.”

He concluded: “We have too few people at the top of our media companies who look and act and know what it’s like to be the users [of the] content.”

Session chair Kamal Ahmed, former BBC News Editorial Director, suggested that “too many media companies are still led by dinosaurs who are trying to sweat an old model”.

Analyst Claire Enders responded: “That’s true of the US – there are an awful lot of really old people... but, in the UK, we have an incredibly diverse leadership and female-led [organisations].”

She added that the UK’s public service broadcasting system – “the biggest

in the world” – together with the licence fee and dominant pay-TV company Sky and its smaller rival, Virgin, offers “extraordinary levels of differentiation with SVoDs... that makes for a large number of sustainable businesses”.

Shapiro interjected: “The world is 63% under the age of 40; Europe is the upside down of that, so a lot of the change, from a consumer standpoint with younger generations, is on its way here.”

Simon Pitts said: “Viewers don’t really care whether you have global scale or not; they care that your content is good. Good increasingly means, in the UK, relevant, [which means] UK stories, UK dramas, UK news, UK sport and, in our case, Scottish.”

He pointed to data from the first half of the year, which showed that, of the top 500 programmes across all channels and streamers in Scotland, 76% were on his channel, STV, 19% were on BBC One – and none were on Netflix.

“The most popular show on our channel this year is a Scottish drama by Irvine Welsh. On Netflix, the most popular show in the first half of the year was a Lewis Capaldi documentary. [On] Amazon it’s the same picture – *The Rig* with Martin Compston. This doesn’t just tell you that local content matters: it tells you that it almost always wins.”

Notwithstanding this success, he said: “There is a real imperative to diversify.” STV is investing in its studio business and streaming service. “This year, for the first time, more than half our profit will come from those new areas – five years ago, we were 80% dependent on linear-TV advertising.”

Paramount Global’s Maria Kyriacou pointed to the five years of double-digit growth enjoyed by Channel 5 streaming service My5 as further proof that local programming wins out. The secret of its success? “British content – it’s as simple as that,” she said.

Shapiro agreed: “Local content is

going to be king. The big tech death stars are coming in but they’re not here to put you out of business... they know that they can’t afford to spend the same amount of money per consumer on local content that you can.”

British TV can only go so far on its own without regulation. Pitt said: “The asymmetry of power, I may not need to tell you, between STV and Amazon

is fairly pronounced – we have to remind them who we are when we go into the room. We need that Media Bill; we need intervention for us to be at the top table when it comes to those media choices on people’s phones.”

Kyriacou added: “Ultimately, it’s [about] where our audience is going, and we’ve talked this to death as an industry – make sure you’re following them

and don’t make excuses about not doing it.

“It’s [about] moving to a streaming model; moving to IP [hence] our participation in Freely [the new online service from Everyone TV; [calling on] the Government to [progress] the Media Bill so we are supported as PSBs and British content continues to be supported into the future.

“What’s on us, though, is to make sure that our platforms [perform] next year. For us, it is about updating the My5 platform, making it stronger for users, a better user experience, a better advertising experience. The one big shining star for us in advertising is that AVoD’s going to grow.” ■

Session Three, ‘The future of the media universe – is scale the only way?’ was chaired by Kamal Ahmed, co-founder of The News Movement. The panellists were: Claire Enders, founder of Enders Analysis; Maria Kyriacou, President, Broadcast and Studios, International Markets, Paramount Global; Simon Pitts, CEO of STV Group; and media cartographer Evan Shapiro. The producer was Helen Scott. Report by Matthew Bell.

‘BIG TECH NEEDS YOU... YOU NEED TO SWAGGER WHEN YOU WALK INTO THE ROOM’

Sky's CEO explains why the UK creative industries need more help through state intervention

Q Matthew Garrahan, *Financial Times*: Sky was primarily a satellite business. You've moved aggressively into IP. Are you turning off the satellite dishes any time soon?

A Dana Strong, Sky: It's a key strategic pillar for us to move on to a new, IP-based platform and this year we literally blew the satellite dish up in our TV commercials.... Seeing where the trends in consumption were going, we wanted to ensure consumers had choice...

The most frustrating element right now... that we hear about from consumers is how long it takes to find something to watch. We are using the IP platform to solve that problem.

We have millions of customers who love their service from the satellite dish with the Q platform, which is amazing by the way, and we have no desire to disrupt them. [But] we are finding that the vast majority of customers signing up for a service now are signing up for the IP platform.

Q Matthew Garrahan: Where does Sky now fit within the Comcast portfolio?

A Dana Strong: Believe it or not, the acquisition was five years ago.... The Sky business benefits from Comcast's scale, and to have foreseen that in 2018, when the deal was done, was quite visionary.... It gives us a very important and solid foundation from which to make investments in order to innovate for the Sky business and Sky customers.

Q Matthew Garrahan: You've got a report coming out today on the red tape stifling the creative industries. Please could you elaborate a little?

A Dana Strong: We wanted to highlight the growth potential in the creative economy which we believe is... a really important component of the economy.

But if we're honest, you would have to say that the creative economy is



Richard Kendall

International keynote: Dana Strong

fragile... if it doesn't get the right support and right regulation, it can unwind quite quickly. It's a project-based economy, so someone shows up, does a movie, it takes 12 months to shoot the movie, and then they go on to the next project. If you don't have a tax regime that's welcoming those communities to locate here in the UK, you can find that those projects move to other territories very quickly...

Protecting the tax regime is an important component of it [as is] matching the growth and vision by getting skills into the economy, training people, [including] apprentices, and making sure that we're moving a bit faster on new studio spaces and new infrastructure.

Q Matthew Garrahan: Do you think the Government will listen?... Lucy Frazer is the 12th culture secretary in 13 years; Labour, by comparison, had five in 13 years. Does this Government care about the creative and media industries?

A Dana Strong: No doubt there has been a lot of change... but today a couple of things feel different. The first is that, from the time Lucy Frazer became secretary of state, [there has been] a very open-door [approach] to the community...

The other thing I would say is that, around the cabinet table, there are four or five former secretaries of state for culture... including Jeremy Hunt, the Chancellor, and Oliver Dowden, really influential members of cabinet, who [received] a big step up in their careers [as culture ministers] and have a passion for it and an emotional attachment to the importance of the creative economy.

Q Matthew Garrahan: Where do Premier League [football] rights fit in your plans?

A Dana Strong: The Premier League has been a 30-year partnership and... it is a wonderful cultural icon. We all get together in those live moments... and "live-local" will continue to be what drives behaviours and emotion – sport is at the very centre of that, so we feel that sport is an incredibly important part of not just our heritage but also our future. The Premier League is absolutely

an important part, but it's one of many that we have in the portfolio – from the English Football League to Formula 1, cricket, NFL, tennis, you name it – we're in a very strong position because we've locked in rights for multiple years.

Our focus area over the last year or two with the Premier League has been to make sure that we're growing audiences – we call it "expansive fandom".

As an example, Formula 1 has

regardless of which game is showing in which slot, whether it's Saturday at 12:30pm or Sunday at 4:30pm – is on the Sky platform and the customer has the choice. We feel that we're in a very good position, regardless of how [the auction turns out].

Q Matthew Garrahan: Your HBO deal, which creates a lot of the programming on Sky Atlantic [Succession, The White Lotus, The Last of Us]



Richard Kendal

brought in a very young demographic and more of the female demographic.

So, how can we ignite more passion from female fans in football? Of course, the Women's Super League is a huge component of that and we are proud of our coverage, but also we're [thinking] about changing the way we show up in YouTube and social media, thinking about our commentators, about how we engage with storytelling to bring in women and under-35s – we've had really impressive growth over the past 12 months.

Q Matthew Garrahan: Are you expecting Warner Bros. Discovery to make a big play for the [Premier League] rights now that it has absorbed BT Sport?

A Dana Strong: It would be perilous of me to predict the outcome of the auction, which is coming up in a couple of months, let alone trying to predict what some of the strategies would be.... We have a long-term carriage deal with BT, now TNT Sport, which means that [the match] –

is up in 2026.... If HBO goes direct [to consumers] in Europe in three years, is that going to cause you a big problem?

A Dana Strong: You've given me all the tough ones, right? We have a very long history of partnership with Warner and we think we have represented that content extremely well, and built brands and fandom and audiences for that content...

We are well known for creating environments where our partners can get more economic benefit by working with us than working against us. We bring audiences efficiently to content and we allow everyone to share in the economic benefits of that, including the consumer who gets to pay a better price because we're able to aggregate services.... We are quite optimistic. ■

In Session Four, 'International keynote: Dana Strong', the Group CEO of Sky was interviewed by Matthew Garrahan, Head of Digital, Financial Times. The producer was Sue Robertson. Report by Matthew Bell.

Many of the key players in the contest to land the most desirable sports rights in UK media were gathered on stage for this session

The spiralling cost of sports rights, the rise of women's football and the threat that big tech companies pose to traditional broadcasters were some of the subjects covered in a lively session on the sporting media landscape.

Kicking off the discussion, session host Ade Adepitan asked whether the cost of sports rights had peaked? "We are facing intrinsic rights value headwinds," admitted Warner Bros. Discovery Sports executive Andrew Georgiou, not least the concerns about the impact of increasing competition.

Nevertheless, he said, "the reality of sports rights is a little bit different because, ultimately, you also have to think about the competition in the market when you're bidding for those rights.

"You've got to marry up the long-term structural headwinds of cable television, while protecting profitability, and at the same time warding off competitors coming into the market."

Georgiou continued: "We've seen across Europe that [the market] is correcting itself – we are seeing lower sports rights... it does feel like we are at the top of the cycle."

DAZN boss Shay Segev pointed out, however, that women's sport is "probably at the beginning of its cycle but, broadly speaking, if we're looking at the moment, you're right. I totally agree with Andrew... rights are at their peak."

Sky's Stephen van Rooyen added: "It's a mixed bag; some rights will go up, some will go down.... We take a rational and disciplined view of what those rights are worth to us as a business."

"Show me the money, boys!" roared women's football chief Dawn Airey. "This is an extraordinary statistic from Deloitte [I read] a couple of years ago: women's sports rights globally – [and] that includes money taken at the gate and money paid in terms of licensing



Richard Kendall

and sponsorship – is \$1bn.

"Would you hazard a guess as to what the equivalent number is for men's sport? \$471bn.... That is a massive, massive opportunity for the women's game."

Airey pointed out that 29 million people in the UK watched some of the recent women's World Cup. "Of that, 11.5 million had never watched a men's World Cup... there is a new audience for sport.

"Women's football has the potential to be one of the biggest sports globally.

It's number four in terms of viewership in the UK; we've seen massive increases in attendances and [broadcast] audiences; we've seen an explosion in social engagement.

"We are about to take our rights to market and I have to tell you we're expecting a very big increase."

Van Rooyen offered a note of caution: "We've had an incredible 12 months, particularly with the Lionesses, but there is a long way still to go to close the gap between a big men's football game and a women's football



From left: Dawn Airey, Andrew Georgiou, Ade Adepitan, Stephen van Rooyen and Shay Segev

Richard Kendall

game... we're on that climb and we should be on that climb.

"It is good business sense to pursue it... and it's the right thing to do. As sports broadcasters, we have a responsibility to muscle this through."

Airey is looking to innovate in the women's game: "All of the insight that we've got about the audiences for women's football is that they do expect to be able to get closer to the game.

"There are a lot of innovations that you could do. Why can't, and I'm not saying this is about to happen... we mic up refs or have cameras on the bench [to] get a more intimate experience? Certainly, in the women's game, that's what the fans want.

"You can get closer to grassroots [football] and fandom through social [media], but you've got to do that through linear TV as well because you want that big match-day experience."

Georgiou said: "Linear television and big-screen experiences for sport remain the predominant way of watching the content... for most audiences. But, he added: "The engagement opportunity that digital delivery provides is significant. We always hear about Gen Z and the millennials having short attention spans for sport – it's just not the case... just look at gaming, for example, if it's engaging, they will engage... and watch for longer."

Van Rooyen said that innovations, such as The Hundred or IPL in cricket, "bring in new audiences and allow better storytelling for different types of audience and that is good".

And, added Georgiou: "More is not

necessarily better – you want more premium content that cuts through... Volume and long-tail content that has minimal impact doesn't suit anyone's agenda."

Adepitan asked whether sports broadcasters' primary audiences remained local, or if they were now prioritising international viewers. "We start with our local audience – we are here to serve fans of respective sports and leagues in the countries in which we operate," replied Van Rooyen. "There are very few sports that travel globally and have the same audience globally – it's an alluring thought... the Premier League is incredible here and it's growing around the world, but it's disproport-

'FUNDAMENTALLY, SPORT IS LOCAL CONTENT'

tionately larger here than there."

Georgiou added: "There are pockets of opportunity but, fundamentally, sport is local content."

"The big money is invariably in your domestic territory," said Airey. "Will that change? Interesting question. Will one of the big streamers come along?"

"At the moment we look quite traditionally at the best domestic deal one can do and get, off the back of that, the best international distribution. That's a pretty standard model."

Do traditional sports broadcasters

feel threatened by the big US tech companies, asked Adepitan, suggesting that "[for now] they're just dabbling".

"It's true but you could read that both ways," said Van Rooyen. "They are very rational about what they do... no one is blowing their brains out on buying something. That might happen – who knows? You can't do anything if they decide to do that."

"They've made a bigger move in the US," said Segev, where Amazon has bought the rights to Thursday-night NFL games and Apple shows Major League Soccer matches. "But it's a different business model outside the US."

"It's difficult to speculate about what they'll do because they could do anything – they have the capability to do everything," added Georgiou.

"What we can talk about is what they have done. And what they have done has been quite rational [in terms of] what sport is doing for their core businesses... if it becomes irrational, then hang on to your hats." ■

Session Five, 'Kicking and streaming: the ever-changing sports media landscape and what comes next', was hosted by TV presenter and Paralympic medallist Ade Adepitan and featured: Dawn Airey, Chair, FA Women's Super League and Women's Championship Football; Andrew Georgiou, President and MD, Warner Bros. Discovery UK and Ireland and Warner Bros. Discovery Sports Europe; Stephen van Rooyen, CEO, Sky UK and Ireland and Group Chief Commercial Officer; and Shay Segev, CEO, DAZN. The producer was Joe Blake-Turner. Report by Matthew Bell.

Liberty Global's CEO is bullish about a future in which he foresees no letup in the demand for content

Richard Kendall

International keynote: Mike Fries

Liberty Global's decision to sell its stake in All3Media was "bittersweet", said its CEO and Vice-Chair Mike Fries. The telecommunications giant and its partner, Warner Bros. Discovery, are in the process of selling the production and distribution company responsible for *Fleabag*, *Gogglebox* and *The Traitors*. But the sale had "nothing to do with the business itself – we love Jane [Turton] and what All3 does.

"You all know the story: 50 wonderful studios, £1bn of revenue – and pretty much double that since we've been investors – hundreds of awards. It's done an incredible job. But the industry is changing and studios are searching for scale, especially pure-play studios such as All3Media.

"[With] Warner Bros. Discovery, we decided that this might be a business that has greater value on a larger platform and help transform other studio businesses."

Even though talks with ITV – itself part-owned by Liberty – fell through, Fries revealed that "pretty much everyone you can think of is interested. Let's see what happens. If we end up continuing with [All3Media], that would be fine with me as well."

The CEO – who started at Liberty in 1990 as its fifth member of staff, as interviewer Katie Prescott reminded the Cambridge audience – recently relocated from Colorado to the UK. Here, the company also has stakes in

Vodafone, Formula E – and Virgin Media O2, whose telecommunications products include cable TV, broadband and phone services to 5.8 million customers.

Referencing the theme of the conference, Fries didn't agree that there was "too much to watch". Rather, he said: "The problem is that it is too hard to find and it's getting too expensive. So what [Virgin Media O2] and Sky and others are trying to do is create seamless navigation, voice-controlled search and metadata.

"If you want to watch a show, you don't have to Google which network it is on. You just ask for it and it pops up. That will make this a lot easier."

Looking ahead, Fries noted that the growth areas for Liberty were in technology and infrastructure, particularly data centres. While he admitted it was "boring for this crowd", there was plenty to be gleaned from where its \$3bn of venture capital funding was being spent.

He said: "Basically everything you're doing on the internet resides somewhere in the cloud. And that cloud isn't in the sky, it's in a building this size, on hundreds of computers and servers.

"That business is booming. Infrastructure is on fire. Whether it's AI or the metaverse or streaming, the amount of data moving around this country is growing 20%, 30% a year."

AI is another key area for Liberty's venture portfolio. One of its main new investments is in Metaphysic, the company responsible for the holographic concert *ABBA Voyage*.

In a conference obsessed by predictions of how AI will reshape the screen industry, Fries made no bones that "this is not hype. This is real. In 10 years' time we will look back, and it will be more transformational than the internet has been over the past 30 years."

He added: "ChatGPT was an iPhone moment," citing a thought leader at US tech company Nvidia he had spoken to the previous day. "All of a sudden we could each talk to these massive language models and get information back. [ChatGPT gained] 100 million users in two months – that's got everyone focused on what's been happening behind the scenes.

"Everybody here is curious about it, but should also be engaging in it," said

Fries. "AT&T said the other day that it wants all 90,000 of its employees to utilise AI by the end of this year in some shape or form. That's change management.

"I worry about the same things that you are all worried about. But I'm pretty excited."

The writers' and actors' strike in the US is arguably the most high-profile challenge to AI yet. When asked for his opinion, Fries suggested that this resistance to AI is "the fear of the unknown. It's probably not the best



Katie Prescott

Richard Kendall

time to negotiate because, in a few years, you might know a lot more about AI. But maybe their view is to start here and, in three years when it starts to settle down, then they'll take it to another level."

Discussion turned to Disney's recent deal with Charter Communications – the US's second-largest cable company – after the former finally reached an agreement to return most Disney content to Charter services.

Fries described the resolution as a "win-win". When Prescott suggested it was an "uneasy truce", Fries countered that "an uneasy truce is a win-win, because it could have gone either way".

The fallout was a clear sign that the traditional symbiosis of cable companies and content providers is in jeopardy. "Content wanted an open marriage – that's how I see it," Fries said. "Their view was: we want our cake and we want to eat it, too.

"We want to continue to be paid by

you in this traditional way where we can make rate increases all the time, but we also want to take our best content and put it on the streaming platforms because we see the future there. That's a difficult position. It was inevitable that Charter and Disney would have this conflict."

Given the "arms race" in content investment between the global media giants, Fries considered it understandable that old strategies were being questioned. "What people are doing is saying: 'Let's be sure we have economic models to support [investment in content]; whether that means sharing content, or licensing it, or putting it into theatres. Disney is still going to make great content. I don't see that changing."

For all the challenges, opportunities, friction and double-edged swords on the horizon for the media industry, it was reassuring that demand from audiences showed no sign of cooling. Looking into his crystal ball, Fries suggested that demand would only increase: "I think consumers want more. They want more content, they want more virtual reality, they want more interactivity, they want more connectivity. Which is a good place for all of us to be, because it's an ecosystem that every year consumes more of it, and you can't say that about every industry."

As tech merges with its content – Fries referenced TikTok, YouTube and Instagram – he predicted that the scope of tech companies would broaden. "You see what big tech is doing and you, too, would do it if you ran these companies," he said. "In the US, YouTube has all the NFL football rights. Amazon buys MGM, and it's doing a bunch of sports deals. Apple is making great content and creating VR headsets.

"Everyone's blending into the other person's business because there's opportunity, and there's demand.

"It's an exciting time to be in any aspect of this business. There's lots to be worried about, but it's an exciting time to be in this ecosystem." ■

In Session Six, 'International keynote: Mike Fries', the CEO and Vice-Chair of Liberty Global, was interviewed by Katie Prescott, Technology Business Editor of The Times. The producer was Helen Scott. Report by Shilpa Ganatra.

Amid the ever-changing media landscape, how can advertisers harness partnerships and consumer insights to give brands more “bang for their buck”? That was the question global branding expert and session chair Rita Clifton wanted answered, along with which factors her panelists thought “will stay the same” and “which will be totally different”.

Saatchi & Saatchi’s Chief Strategy Officer, Richard Huntingdon – the author, Clifton revealed, of a research paper this year called, “What the fuck is going on?” – thought the fundamental principles of advertising would remain the same. “Humanity evolves over glacial periods of time,” he said. “When we think about the desires and needs, we’re talking about the same human beings.”

However, he cautioned that it is “largely technology that changes things.... We’re witnessing a movement from a period in which marketing was very much about affinity – ‘These are my values as a brand; are they your values?’ – [to now,] when it’s predominantly about technology.”

Another element that remains the same, according to Channel 4’s Chief Revenue Officer, Verica Djurdjevic, is that “brands will still want to be famous, and they will want to be present in everyday lives. So that means they’ll want to reach large numbers of people very quickly.”

Equally, she said, consumers will still be in distinct groups depending on their interests, life stage or where they live, so “personalisation is going to take different forms”.

Spotify’s Head of Sales, EMEA, Rak Patel, agreed that “there are some things that won’t change at all”, adding that, at his company, innovation and connection were important. “In the world we live in today, connection is critical. If you take a platform such as Spotify, we are with our fans 24/7.”

Patel said individualised, not mass, personalisation is also crucial: “It’s not about ‘Can you find me?’, it’s about ‘Do



Rita Clifton



Richard Huntingdon

The future of advertising

How do advertisers reach audiences in an ever-evolving media ecosystem?

you get me?’ – that’s where we’re going.”

Clifton remembered an MBA textbook, *Marketing Warfare*, which talked about ambushing the consumer and using guerrilla marketing. She advocated building relationships rather than engaging consumers in a war.

She also wondered whether, in the so-called “attention economy”, where so many media sources are competing for people’s attention, it was becoming “easier, or harder, to engage”.

Djurdjevic said that studying Channel 4 audiences’ behaviour was helpful: “The quality of the attention at different moments and in different

mindsets is very important” to advertisers, broadcasters and content owners.

Potentially, it could be harder because there were so many different channels to consider and different kinds of attention. “But I do think [that looking at] where and how that advertising experience fits, we can potentially create things that are better for our viewers as well as doing the best for the brand,” she said.

Djurdjevic said the experience of watching *Gogglebox* on a Friday night is “often a shared experience. It certainly is in my house. We sit down and watch it together,” so the advertising, “can be



Verica Djurdjevic

a bit more expansive... more creative and tell a story in a different way. We've had brands that have done that brilliantly. John Lewis is one very good example."

However, at 8:00pm on a weekday, she said: "People are often also doing their shopping online while they're watching." It was important to consider: "How can we work with brands to take advantage of that? Brands and their agencies need a deep understanding of how audiences engage, combined with thinking: 'What's the most creative and engaging way I can be part of that.'"

Patel agreed: "Marrying consumer experience with advertising experience is sacrosanct."

He pointed to a campaign Spotify did with Channel 4 to tell younger audiences that the broadcaster had dropped the All 4 name it had used for its online service in favour of Channel 4. The rebranding was represented to them via recommendations of hit Channel 4 shows a user might want to watch – such as *Friday Night Dinner* – based on their musical tastes and listening habits.

They were accompanied by audio notes, 150 of which were recorded by



Rak Patel

the radio presenter Nick Grimshaw. Patel joked: "Now we have AI, we might not need him for that long."

As the audience, mindful of the striking US actors' position on AI, drew a sharp intake of breath, Clifton shot back: "Fighting talk!"

Huntingdon was keen to point out that the industry has failed "to build a medium as powerful as TV as an advertising vehicle". He said that advertising and TV are like a "marriage made in heaven" and "one of our failings is that, as attention gets fragmented in all its forms, we haven't replaced it".

Clifton moved on to consumer insights. She said that "insight is such an overused word" in advertising, but asked whether it could be combined with gut instinct and machine learning to help brands.

Huntingdon argued that insight is "the engine that makes everything work. It's the connection" that recognises in people "something that's fundamental and important to them".

Insight, moreover, was where content and advertising met because both were trying to "reveal something about humanity or the way things work. It's a fundamental source of connection."

Huntingdon pointed to a successful

Direct Line advertising campaign that used Harvey Keitel's *Pulp Fiction* character Winston Wolfe (who cleans things up), to tap into the fact that consumers want insurance not just to get their money back, but to "put things back like they never happened".

Channel 4, armed with the knowledge from the programmes it makes and the relationships it has with its audience, is able to "speak to brands and advertisers... and reflect back a bit about modern Britain", said Djurdjevic.

New ways to engage media users are being explored, including the use of AI. Patel said Spotify uses "streaming intelligence", which "powers everything we do". The service has also just launched AI DJ. "This is a personalised DJ that 551 million users have," said Patel, adding: "I only listen to AI DJ now."

The AI is now, apparently, an employee at Spotify and, like Patel, has a sense of humour. Patel listens only to house music but, on April Fool's Day, he said: "AI DJ started playing me classical music... then, after 10 seconds, he said: 'April Fool!'"

Clifton concluded that, hopefully, there would be a future for advertising but, "bearing in mind that lots of people think advertising is populated by Dr Evils... trying to ruin everything", she wondered if advertising was "saving the world or accelerating its destruction"?

Huntingdon said it can "save us if we want it to" and that "we're children of capitalism". Patel said it can provide education and entertainment, suggesting that Spotify's music can make people feel calm.

To which Clifton quipped: "We're all going into oblivion, listening to some wonderful music." ■

Session Seven, 'The Future of Advertising', was chaired by global branding expert Rita Clifton CBE. The panellists were: Verica Djurdjevic, Chief Revenue Officer, Channel 4; Richard Huntington, Chief Strategy Officer, Saatchi & Saatchi; and Rak Patel, Head of Sales, EMEA, Spotify. The producer was Helen Scott. Report by Tara Conlan.

All pictures: Richard Kendall

Secretary of State keynote



Lucy Frazer, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, addresses the future of TV against a background of change

Broadcasters, production companies and streamers must ensure “this industry is synonymous with talent, opportunity and inclusivity, and not the scandals of #MeToo”.

In a wide-ranging speech that brought a personal touch to the convention, Lucy Frazer, who was appointed culture secretary in February, insisted: “TV studios, production facilities and offices need to be places where people feel safe. Places where working cultures are responsible and accountable, and do not allow for possible abuses of power. Places where everyone feels able to speak up, no matter how junior, and where leaders never turn a blind eye.”

She was, of course, speaking days after a joint investigation by Channel 4, *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* had alleged that Russell Brand had raped, sexually assaulted and emotionally abused women during the height of his fame as a TV and radio presenter at the BBC and Channel 4 between 2006 and 2013. Brand had denied all allegations.

Striking an empathetic note throughout, Frazer began by recalling how, as a seven-year-old, she had fantasised about starring in her own TV show. “After school I watched Tony Hart transform Morph on my screen and imagined my future on the TV. The fact that I was absolutely hopeless at art never appeared to me to be a barrier to my prospective career,” she said.

She discarded her dream of working in TV when she started reading for a law degree, but told the convention that, had she tried to forge a career in TV, she would have been working in a world-leading sector.

“Today, in 2023, we produce the best of the best,” she continued, listing some of the memorable programmes that have been produced, filmed and written in the UK, such as *Sex Education*, *The Crown* and *Luther*.

“And with imitation being the sincerest form of flattery, many of our great TV shows and formats have spawned remakes all over the world – from *Love Island* and *The Office* to *Bake Off* and *Ghosts*,” said Frazer.

She added: “Our PSBs have been able to bring the same levels of creativity to their programming as do streaming services backed by some of the biggest businesses in the world.

“You see this in countless programmes, from *Happy Valley* and *Unforgotten*

Richard Kendall

to *Taskmaster* and *Derry Girls*.” As for her own viewing habits, the minister was enjoying *Ted Lasso*.

“But despite this excellence, it would be foolish to ignore the enormous challenges that you all face in remaining competitive,” Frazer warned.

“The Government is committed to our film and high-end TV sector, and we want to ensure that it is in the best possible position to bounce back once the US strikes are resolved,” she said.

Ofcom’s research had highlighted the seismic scale of change. The number of TV programmes attracting 4 million or more viewers had halved since 2014. News shows and soaps were seeing steep declines in viewer numbers across the board.

“They show that TikTok, for the second year in a row, was the fastest-growing source of news in the UK.”

Meanwhile, artificial intelligence was beginning to transform the way content was consumed and created.

“The Government has an interest in this – because your success is success for our economy, with the jobs and growth you support – and your success is also success for our society

because the content you create helps to entertain, challenge, console and educate,” said Frazer.

She saw her role as threefold: maximising the growth potential of the creative industries; supporting the TV business to navigate this changing

‘WE NEED TO ENSURE THAT WHAT WE CREATE STAYS HERE AND THE VALUE WE CREATE STAYS HERE’

world; and ensuring that media freedoms were championed.

The culture secretary said she was determined that the UK remain an attractive place for global content producers: “In February, I worked with the Chancellor to ensure we not only continue the High-End TV Tax Relief and other creative tax reliefs, but actually

increase them, in the form of the new Audio-Visual Expenditure Credit.

“In June, I published our Sector Vision – which is a collaboration with the industry – in particular, the Creative Industries Council. This vision set out our ambition for the creative industries as a whole – to grow the sector by £50bn, create a million new jobs and a pipeline of talent, all by 2030.”

Creative Industries Clusters across the country – TV in Leeds and gaming in Dundee and Bristol – were being invested in. And she had recently announced a collaboration between the National Film and Television School, Royal Holloway, University of London and Pinewood Studios for the development of green screens.

During the pandemic, the £1.5bn Culture Recovery Fund and the Film and TV Restart Scheme had supported more than 100,000 jobs for cast and crew on at least 1,000 productions.

The Media Bill was being brought forward and would update the system in which public service broadcasters operate, future-proof it and level the playing field. “It does this by making sure public service broadcasters’ apps ▶



Sex Education

Netflix

► such as BBC iPlayer, ITVX, STV Player, the Channel 4 app, My5 and S4C's Clic are always easy to find and watch, whether you're on a smart TV or using a streaming stick," said the minister.

Frazer continued: "The bill is about ensuring we have the right playing field in place for all parts of the TV ecosystem to thrive. This is part of our work to help bring TV into the digital age, but we recognise there is more to do – because we recognise that internet-provided TV is growing.

"Free-to-view television is a vitally important part of our television landscape, and this Government wants to encourage the sector to keep embracing innovation and technological development, but we're not going to pull the rug from under the devoted audiences of Freeview channels.

"We want terrestrial television to remain accessible for the foreseeable future. Today, I can confirm that we're launching a new programme of work on the future of TV distribution, alongside a call for evidence from Ofcom – which it will publish later in the autumn.

"My department will undertake a six-month research project, looking at changing viewing habits and technologies that will impact how shows are brought to our screen, both now and in the decades to come – acknowledging, always, the importance of access."

She added: "We are also working within my department, with industry and with Ofcom, to consider the impact of specific new technologies such as AI and to shape an evidence base that can guide future policymaking."

In this context, it was vital to "protect and maintain the integrity of our high-quality news output" and, in the coming weeks, her department would be hosting several roundtables on AI to discuss its implications for the media and the creative industries.

"Finally, this is all so important because your work retains and enhances our media freedom," she said. "Media freedom is central to our values as a country, and to mine as your culture secretary." ■

In Session Eight, 'Secretary of State keynote', the Rt Hon Lucy Frazer KC, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, was interviewed by Alex Mahon. The producer was Sue Roberston. Report by Steve Clarke.



Lucy Frazer interviewed by Alex Mahon

Richard Kendal

QUESTION & ANSWER

Q Alex Mahon, CEO, Channel 4: The creative industries are one of the UK's biggest success stories. How do you view the balance between the work that goes on in the UK on behalf of other companies versus company value based on IP creation?

A Lucy Frazer: All those elements are critical. We are building more studio space and the Government is supporting and encouraging that. In a couple of years, we'll have more studio space in the UK than there is in LA.

We view that as hugely positive because it gives jobs to local people. We also need to ensure that we encourage creativity in terms of production. The interesting thing that I hear across the board is that there's a huge independent sector that doesn't exist in other countries, but we do need to ensure that what we create stays here and the value we create stays here.

Alex Mahon: I think that will need more thinking about in the future because, when companies get big here, they tend to be bought by people from elsewhere.

Q Alex Mahon: With the BBC licence fee declining and you doing a review of it, how do you feel about the BBC having to make all these difficult decisions about what it is going to cut. We read in the press that *Newsnight*, a programme that does immense investigations, is under threat. How do you feel about the trade-offs and the cuts the BBC is having to make?

A Lucy Frazer: I think Tim [BBC Director-General Tim Davie] would say those are questions for him. Operational decisions are for the BBC, not government... My job as culture secretary is to ensure the BBC is funded and continues to thrive.

We are looking at BBC funding...The licence fee is £159, a not insubstantial amount of money for many people. We need to ensure it is fair...The number of people paying the licence fee is going down and the media landscape is changing.

It's my job to make sure that the BBC is fit for the future... we need to look very carefully at how the BBC is funded.

Q John McVay, CEO of Pact: One of the least successful parts of the UK creative economy is our indigenous feature film production, which has been in decline for many years. Is this something you'd be interested in discussing?

A Lucy Frazer: The obvious answer is yes. I am very happy to have discussions with you on this and many other subjects.

Q Tara Conlan, Television: How are you going to level the playing field between traditional TV and internet TV? Will you give the PSBs significant prominence? Also, given that most people employed in TV are freelance, how do you expect them to stand up and speak out against abuses, given the precarious state of their employment?

A Lucy Frazer: On prominence, we're bringing forward the Media Bill... it's a core part of the bill. On your second question, the Government supports the work the industry is doing to ensure people's workplaces are safe.



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The past few years have been eventful for most, but the highs and lows of ITV's fortunes have been particularly pronounced. Its advertising revenues were hit hard by the pandemic, but the broadcaster bounced back to achieve record advertising in 2021-22. At the end of 2022, there was another watershed moment: it launched ITVX, its heavyweight streaming service to replace ITV Hub with a combined 26,000 hours of ITV and Britbox content. But, this year, its advertising revenues have again slumped.

As session chair Dharshini David highlighted, ITVX enjoyed a "big bang start", serving about 2 billion streams in less than a year.

But, said ITV's CEO, Carolyn McCall: "More important is that monthly active users – people who are coming regularly – has gone up by 24%. We've got nearly 12.5 million monthly active users. And registrations have gone up to something like 25 or 28 million."

Another key metric is a 93% increase in light viewers, those who come for ITV's big hitters, such as *Love Island*, World Cup football or rugby, then engage with other programmes on the platform.

"That means, as a streaming service, it's working," said McCall, who took up her post in 2018. "And it's working from an advertising point of view because there's a lot more inventory and a lot more quality audience, [and] we're reaching people who were not coming as frequently before."

Part of ITV's digital strategy is to improve the user experience and personalisation within the app via Planet V, its in-house advertising and targeting platform. Referring to "The future of advertising" session, McCall said: "I loved it when they said of personalisation, 'It's not just about getting me, it's about understanding me.' That is really important. The more data we have, the more we understand how we can gently bring you in, rather than you feel[ing] targeted."

"On all levels, the strategy is of super-charging streaming.... Do you remember the share price absolutely tanked when we announced ITVX? It didn't help that it was on the fifth day of Russia invading Ukraine. It was not the right timing for the investors to understand

UK keynote: Carolyn McCall

The ITV CEO highlights ITVX's success – and wonders when the ad market will turn



Richard Kendall

why we were doing it the way we did. [But now] they are hugely supportive of the strategy. They believe it's the right thing to do."

However, ITV's continued success – and, indeed, that of other commercial broadcast organisations – still depends significantly on advertising revenue. McCall made no bones about the inclement year the company is experiencing, with a difficult first half (in March, it issued a warning that advertising revenue would fall 11% in the first quarter) compounded by an unexpectedly challenging second half.

The problem, McCall said in no uncertain terms, was that advertising spend was linked to the health of the UK economy. As such, it was the responsibility of the Government to improve conditions.

"It talks about growth all the time, but what are the initiatives for properly growing the economy?" she wondered. "It feels like everyone's waiting because everyone knows there's going to be an election. It is frustrating because, economically, we are doing worse than every single European country, other than Germany."

Asked if any politician had a credible plan, she drew laughter from the audience by replying: "You would be able to answer that if anyone announced a plan. I can't distinguish between the policies. I can't tell what the real differences are and what really is going to get us out of what is quite a stagnant, quite gloomy [time]."

ITV's current strategy is to preserve its linear advertising while boosting digital revenue – that's where Planet V comes in – and by expanding ITV Studios "so that you've three different profit pools rather than one". The final pillar suggested that the acquisition of All3Media (part-owned by Liberty Global, which also has a stake in ITV) would have been a comfortable fit, had ITV not pulled out of talks in July.

David picked up on the phrasing of the statement issued at the time – that ITV "continues to monitor but is no longer actively exploring the possible acquisition of All3Media" – which suggested it may be open to renegotiation if conditions were favourable.

McCall explained the statement: "Because we're a quoted company, we had to say that we were no longer actively exploring, because that was



Dharshini David

Richard Kendall

true. We said we're monitoring the situation, which we are. And any process that is kicked off, we will watch very closely. That's what I've said and that's all I'm going to say."

ITV's bid to grow its studio offering continues through smaller acquisitions and organic growth. It has also attracted proven talents across the industry to set up labels within ITV Studios. Examples include Red Production Company founder Nicola Shindler, who set up Quay Street Productions, and former Head of Television at Blueprint, Dominic Treadwell-Collins, the founder of drama label Happy Prince.

ITV's future also offers a blast from the past. *Big Brother*, the Banijay (previously Endemol) show that kicked off

'I CAN'T DISTINGUISH BETWEEN THE [PARTIES'] POLICIES... TO GET US OUT OF [THIS STAGNATION]'

the reality-TV revolution in 2000, is the cornerstone of the ITV autumn schedule. The reboot might be seen as a means of leveraging ITV's *Love Island* audience, which is now 10 series in, but McCall stressed that it was intended to appeal to a wider audience.

"*Big Brother* is iconic [but] a lot of people who are under 30 won't necessarily have heard of it," she said.

"[However,] reality is not a genre just for young people. *Love Island* gets a lot – 65% are under 30 – but most reality shows will get a spread. For it to be on ITV, *Big Brother* has to appeal to a broader demographic than only young people."

AI will be integral to ITV's future. On the production side, said McCall: "What I'd really like to do is be able to give all the creatives in our business a platform to experiment and to play with the tools.

"For me, it's about getting everyone used to it, not panicking about it. The threats are obvious and protecting IP is going to be critical. I don't think it replaces human creativity, but there's lots of opportunity to augment creativity."

The ITV CEO was also confident that ad sales would improve: "I do think advertiser revenue will bounce back – I don't want to be too gloomy about that. When it goes, TV is usually the first to go because it's more expensive... But when it comes back, it comes back hard. Covid is a great example of that.

"I think it will recover; it's just that the uncertainty means it's very hard to forecast when that will be." ■

In Session Nine, 'UK keynote: Carolyn McCall', the ITV CEO was interviewed by Dharshini David, BBC Chief Economics Correspondent. The producer was Sue Robertson. Report by Shilpa Ganatra.

A disability access journey

Tonight we celebrate,
tomorrow we go again



Richard Kendal

Simon Minty and Steph Lacey

As an industry and medium, television's strength is its ability to constantly evolve – and the steady, if slow, improvement in disability representation is an important part of that.

Disability consultant and *Gogglebox* star Simon Minty opened the session by celebrating the progress (as well as noting points of regress), before writer and actor Steph Lacey (*Stay Close*, *Creep*) reflected on the work still to be done.

"I grew up in the 1970s and 1980s," Minty began. "There's something called 'mirror image', where, if you're different and then you see people like

you, that can be startling." At that time, the small people he saw on TV were either in fantasies or comedies, so "it was never real, or it was comedic, where we were the butt of the joke".

In a bid for realistic representation, the 2002 Broadcasters' Disability Network manifesto saw the terrestrial channels pledge to increase portrayals of disabled people and provide more employment opportunities in the industry.

Using tenets from the TV Access Project, an updated pledge from 10 of the UK's biggest broadcasters and streamers, Minty highlighted "Five As" that act as a path to these goals.

■ **Anticipate** suggests expecting to

work with disabled people on a regular basis – and the 2012 Paralympics proved a case in point. It was not necessarily realistic in its representation, because not all disabled people are world-class swimmers, joked Minty, but "it made me more confident to wear my bikini".

■ **Ask** invites disabled people to let their accessibility needs be known so they can participate. "I turn on my TV, it doesn't matter what time of day or night, I can be watching a drama, *Question Time*, a comedy, a travel show – there is a disabled person on it. It is invariably Rosie Jones, admittedly, but that's a good thing," Minty said.

■ **Assess** is a question of self-reflection.

Minty noted: “Individuals are allowed to do whatever they want with their lives. But I couldn’t quite work out the *Seven Dwarves* show. It felt a bit voyeuristic. There was something that made me think: ‘You’ve slipped back a bit.’”

However, in 2020, *CripTales* – the BBC comedy drama written, produced, directed and acted by disabled people – was an example of representation done well. “It was personal, it was real and we could tell our stories. I thought it was amazing. It was a one-off and we haven’t done it again. I know ITV looked at it, so maybe it will come back.”

■ **Adjust** shines the light on removing the barriers that put people at a disadvantage. *Strictly Come Dancing* shimmied up to the challenge of showing how inclusion was done. A shining example was the must-see moment that Rose Ayling-Ellis and her dance partner, Giovanni Pernice, brought to the 2021 series. “In terms of public

Blue Peter because in the auditioning process you need to be able to bounce up and down on a trampoline while interviewing someone. I’m pleased to see they’ve lapsed that criterion.

“When it happened, I thought: ‘My work here is done. I can happily retire.’”

It was then Lacey’s turn to command the room. “Let’s not retire just yet – there is still work to be done,” she said. “In a society where 20% identify as deaf, disabled or neurodivergent (DDN), even if we doubled the current level of representation, we would not have proportional inclusion on TV.”

Although the current level of representation is said to be 8%, Lacey asked the Cambridge audience to look hard at the data. “Is it by real, meaningful inclusion or is it by giving a disabled person two lines in one scene across a whole series?” she asked. “Off-screen, where have we got 6.5% representation? Is it by DDN people

Training is a key element, too: “Help people remove the fear of working with DDN talent by equipping them with the language, attitudes and approaches to working with us.

“I regularly run access training with TripleC for broadcasters, productions, cast and crew. It is a moment when you can remove the fear, ask questions, and do that without judgement,” she said.

As writers, disabled people should be trusted with opportunities, and not only to depict stories about disabilities. “Trust us like you trust other writers with other people’s stories,” she said.

Similarly, Lacey continued, normalise auditioning disabled actors for all roles, not just those where the character is disabled: “As an added bonus, you won’t have to worry that you’ve written them as a disabled stereotype, because you’ll have just written them as a character.”

When hiring crew, it’s a simple case of asking what their adjustments are, rather than assuming the barriers will be too great. Access co-ordinators can help embed this as part of a process. “They’re a new role in the industry,” Lacey said. “Working with them makes it so much easier to implement these requirements. If you make [the workplace] accessible from the start, then you won’t have to worry about where you can include DDN talent – you can just do that as you go along.

“TripleC, along with our delivery partners, are running an access co-ordinator scheme this year, so come and talk to us about how we can facilitate that.”

Lacey cited *The A Word* spin-off *Ralph & Katie* as a good example of using access co-ordinators. “Brazen Productions even produced legacy documents. They are on its website and you can consult those to make your productions accessible, too,” she said.

As the session drew to a close, Minty reflected on a picture he showed earlier from when he was campaigning in 2002 – he was Lacey’s age at the time. With a grin, Lacey addressed the audience: “I beg you to listen to what I just said... because I don’t want to still be doing this at his age.” ■

Session Ten, ‘Tonight we celebrate, tomorrow we go again: a disability access journey’, featured writer and actor Steph Lacey and Simon Minty, Disability and Diversity Consultant and Director, Sminty Ltd. It was produced by Simon Minty. Report by Shilpa Ganatra.



Ralph & Katie

BBC

consciousness, this was really, really powerful stuff,” said Minty.

■ **Advocacy** began with Minty spending “20 years knocking on doors, attending events and dinners, doing training and advocating – but from the outside”.

Yet, in the last two decades, people he had been advocating to – such as former BBC Director-General Mark Thompson – have championed the good word from inside the industry.

At the start of his journey as an advocate, one of Minty’s goals was to see a disabled person present *Blue Peter*, which came to pass earlier this year when Abby Cook joined the team. He recalled: “I was told they couldn’t have a wheelchair user [as a presenter] on

being allowed to lead shows, direct and produce? Or is a large number of people who are on shadowing schemes or in junior positions?”

“For me, what that speaks to is a pervasive lack of trust in disabled people. We’re still seen as a mysterious, mythical and risky ‘other’. But it doesn’t have to be that way.”

To help dismantle reticence in hiring disabled people, she set out pointers. Lacey works for Bafta award-winning company TripleC, which works to increase representation of disabled people in the arts and screen industries and has a network of 1,800 creatives. “You don’t have to worry about where to find us any more, we’re right here.”



From left: Piers Morgan
and Krishnan Guru-Murthy

Impartial TV news

The view from the presenter's chair

Krishnan Guru-Murthy and Piers Morgan lock horns

When he sat down in Cambridge for a discussion about the vexed question of impartiality in television news presenters, Piers Morgan was clearly still licking his wounds from his abrupt departure in 2021 from ITV's *Good Morning Britain*. He was quick off the mark, offering a "hypothetical" scenario:

"Imagine that members of the royal family get on Oprah Winfrey's show and make a series of allegations, and most of the presenters that day entirely endorse what these two royals have said, and one presenter courageously

stands up and says: 'I think it's a pack of lies.' Perhaps that is due impartiality, you might argue. Then one of those presenters is invited to leave his job."

This was the example he gave after being asked to provide his definition of impartiality, something he said was an out-of-touch concept: "I think the whole concept of it in modern media is pretty anachronistic. I look for where due impartiality lies on the airwaves, and I don't really see it."

Morgan's fellow panellist, *Channel 4 News* anchor Krishnan Guru-Murthy, was more circumspect. In his view, impartiality "is not about giving equal airtime to every kind of view, it's about making assessments of the situation

and giving a sense of fairness to the main arguments around the thing at the time.

"It doesn't mean you have to have every fringe view reflected, but it does mean you have to have a broad view and you have to treat them the same way. You have to approach all those sides with the same rigour, the same sense of toughness, and give them the same respect."

Moderator Barbara Serra suggested that, even if impartiality didn't exist in perfect form, it remained something for presenters to aspire to. Guru-Murthy agreed but pointed out: "There's a fundamental difference between what I do and what Piers



The view from the broadcasters

TV news chiefs debate whether impartiality rules are still fit for purpose

The subject of regulation was highlighted in the second session on impartiality, which heard from the executives Angelos Frangopoulos (GB News), Deborah Turness (BBC News) and Jonathan Levy (Sky News).

GB News boss Frangopoulos was still smarting from a recent Ofcom ruling that his channel had breached the code by not including a wide range of views during a show in which presenters Esther McVey and Philip Davies, both Conservative MPs, assessed the Spring Budget. Moderator Barbara Serra added that several rulings against the broadcaster, also on the grounds of impartiality, particularly the mix of presenters and politicians, were pending.

Frangopoulos said: “We’re clearly disappointed by the decision by Ofcom. We chose to be regulated, we take the regulation seriously and we work closely with Ofcom as we work through each one of the cases they bring before us.

“In terms of the regulatory environment, we believe in it, we’ve signed up to it, but the word that is missing out of

the description there is ‘due’ [as in ‘due impartiality’]. That’s a very contentious word because the ‘due’ is supposed to empower broadcasters and programme-makers to be able to apply a layer of appropriate impartiality and that is difficult to do when, ultimately, you’ve got a regulator that can basically say, ‘Well, we don’t think it was enough,’ no matter how much you can argue that, actually, we did have other views on that television programme.

“The reality is that we set out to disrupt, we set out to do things differently because we’re not creating content for this room or for other journalists, we’re creating content for the United Kingdom. The difficult truth for people to take on board is that the people of the United Kingdom wanted a service like GB News... we are here to do things differently.”

Deborah Turness, CEO, BBC News and Current Affairs, clarified that her division has an entirely different remit: “The BBC is paid for by all the people and must be there for the people... We’re doing a very different job from the one that Angelos is doing.

“We’ve set out to really understand ▶

does. The expectation is different on a talk show.”

The longtime Channel 4 presenter believed his role of protecting impartiality as a news anchor was valued by viewers: “I think due impartiality on the news is something that huge numbers of people want. There aren’t many moments where I go, ‘Oh, I wish I could say that’ – because I signed up to this 30 years ago.”

Guru-Murthy continued: “People want a sense of fairness. Due impartiality is not a precise science, it’s an art and people have different judgments about what it is. But all the evidence I’ve seen from surveys is that viewers want broadcast journalists to at least make an attempt to be fair to the main subjects. If I interview Keir Starmer, they want me to give him as hard a time as I would Rishi Sunak. I think it’s worth fighting for and trying to maintain that, and I accept it’s not perfect.”

Morgan disagreed, arguing: “I don’t think there’s real impartiality. I see people talk about it and then they get very highfalutin’ about what we do at TalkTV or what GB News does, but I don’t really see a problem with that.” He went on: “I come from a view that you should just have opinions about everything. The real problem is establishing what facts are, what truth is, because we’re living in a fake news era.”

He reminded the audience that he had been cleared of breaching the broadcasting code by Ofcom months after he “was invited to leave” ITV’s *Good Morning Britain*. He added: “I don’t think we need more regulation here. We’re regulated up to our eyeballs.” ■

Session Eleven, ‘Impartiality – what’s the point?’, was split into two parts, both chaired by journalist and presenter Barbara Serra. In this first part, the panellists were broadcaster Piers Morgan and Channel 4 News anchor Krishnan Guru-Murthy. The producer was Louisa Compton. Report by Caroline Frost.

▶ what impartiality means for today's audiences, and... their needs are very different from a decade ago. It requires new things from us."

Turness said the rise of fake news, disinformation and the audience's resulting scepticism posed a bigger challenge for the corporation than it did for other TV news operators. "For the BBC, I feel the most important thing we can do is understand the needs of that sceptical audience so they can trust us. What our audiences want is clarity and a news brand they can trust.

"They want creative journalism holding power to account and asking difficult questions of all politicians and leaders who make decisions on behalf of the population. It's critical today

organisation's newish fact-checking service: "We're going to open up and show you the journalism and checking and verification that we do behind the scenes. We're going to put that all upfront for you to see how we verify the content so you can trust it more."

Turness and Sky News chief Jonathan Levy agreed that having politicians as presenters – such as McVey and Jacob Rees-Mogg, both hosts on GB News – would not be acceptable on their channels. Turness said: "I don't think that represents the BBC's values and what we're there to do. If it's on other platforms, it's for Ofcom to decide whether or not that's OK. Where it does happen, I think you have to make sure you are governed by a code and a set of frame-

content was what audiences were after. "We have to be careful we don't let this idea set in that there's some kind of failure of what existed before Angelos and GB News came along. Millions of people watch Sky News and BBC News and the kind of news that you're setting yourself against."

Levy said his biggest challenge was that potential viewers were receiving their news from digital platforms, many millions more of them than those who watched linear TV.

Levy saw impartiality in a far more positive light than broadcaster Piers Morgan. He said: "Impartiality is just presented as a constraint, and Piers made a distinction between impartiality and getting to the truth; I think they're connected. I see



Barbara Serra



Deborah Turness



Angelos Frangopoulos



Jonathan Levy

All pictures: Richard Kendal

that sceptical news consumers understand the effort that has gone on in organisations that strive to be impartial to deliver that news they trust.

"The audience don't talk about impartiality, they talk about fairness and respect. The BBC must deliver these and a sufficient mix of points of view so that we are representing the debate. We are the town square of this nation.... We are here to provide a service to every person who pays the licence fee.

"I've worked in many media organisations and newsrooms, and I have to say in my time at the BBC, the effort it has gone to in ensuring that we are delivering that global gold standard in editorial quality is astonishing; the level of fact checking, the data analysis, the verification on any generated content that we use."

She highlighted BBC Verify, the

works – you are applying scrutiny, you are holding those others whom you might interview to account – and where that's not happening, clearly there is a problem."

Frangopoulos stressed that GB News was primarily a digital business, with a TV station and radio station attached. Hence, he said: "It allows us to treat content slightly differently on different platforms.... We are all about plurality, we're not really competing with Sky News or the BBC, we are offering something different and a choice in the marketplace.... Journalism should be about debating, looking at all perspectives. The issue is this regulatory layer that actually weakens the ability of broadcasting and journalism to use their judgement in terms of what 'due' is."

Levy disputed Frangopoulos's claim that his more opinionated

impartiality as open-minded, honest, curious, independent inquiry that leads you to the truth."

He reminded the audience that, when Sky's relatively new owner, Comcast, had taken over the channel, it had given a 10-year pledge guaranteeing the news channel's editorial independence.

"I don't think the ideal of impartiality is remotely anachronistic, I think, in a journalistic sense, that it is as important as it ever was." ■

The second part of Session Eleven, 'Impartiality – what's the point?', was chaired by Barbara Serra. The panellists were: Angelos Frangopoulos, CEO, GB News; Jonathan Levy, Executive Editor, Sky News UK; and Deborah Turness, CEO, BBC News and Current Affairs. The producer was Louisa Compton. Report by Caroline Frost.



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The key to capturing attention

A panel of leading innovators provides insight into getting content noticed

How to launch new content depends on the platform you want to launch it on was the main message from some of the leading practitioners at the cutting edge of content creation and marketing.

During an entertaining and engaging session chaired by Roughcut Television Chief Executive, Ash Atalla, it emerged that word of mouth is a key attribute, especially when it comes to relatable and shareable material.

After Atalla introduced Ajaz Ahmed as “the rich man”, Ahmed, the new-media millionaire entrepreneur, whose company AKQA works with clients including Nike, outlined his central message: “Taste used to be dictated top down.” But now it isn’t.

He explained: “The studios, broadcasters, gatekeepers and reviewers could pretty much decide what would be a hit using the power of distribution, schedules... and exposure. We now live in a bottom-up world where popularity is dictated by the masses.

What this means, he said, is that spending millions on advertising “doesn’t necessarily mean that a product will become popular”.

Ahmed added: “Emotionality and familiarity are incredibly potent when it comes to popularising content; yet alone they are insufficient.

“This underscores the importance of social influence... talkability and shareability. Despite the myth, fame doesn’t happen by chance. There’s no such

thing as a viral phenomena, everything needs a nudge to launch it into public consciousness.”

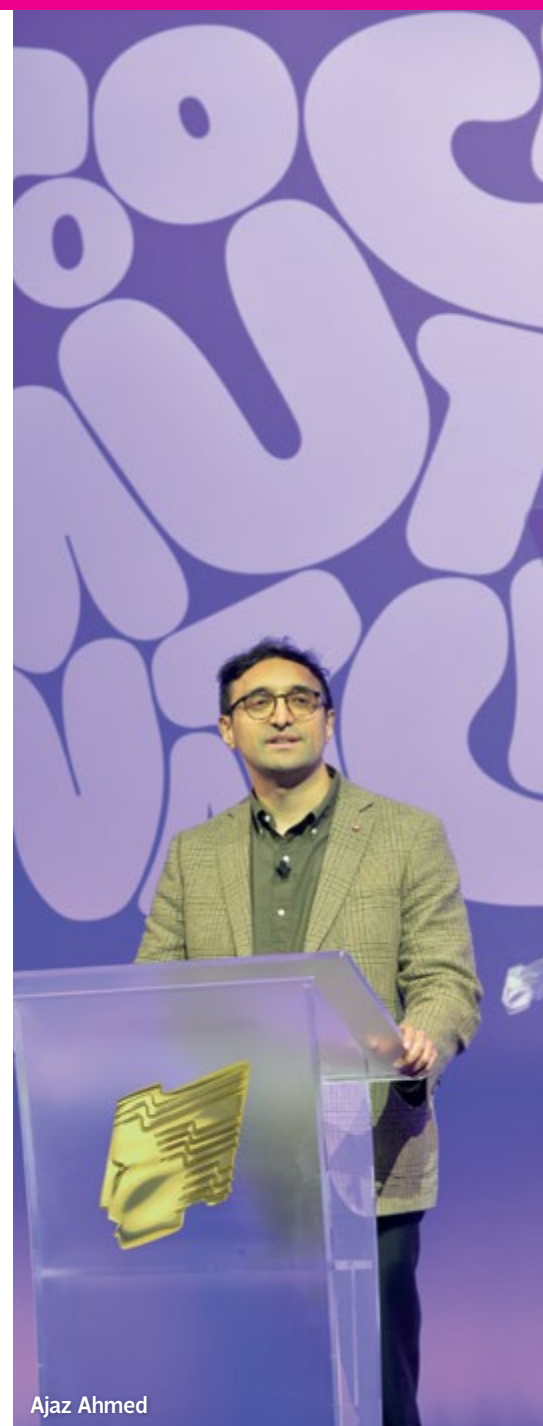
Jordan Schwarzenberger of Arcade Media, who manages YouTube mega-stars The Sidemen, said attention to detail was essential: “The algorithm completely dominates the experience on YouTube... it’s entirely about packaging, title, the first hour and how you frame it... it’s so much more scientific [than some other platforms].”

He outlined how they achieved the billion-odd views a year that The Sidemen’s channels rack up.

“These are seven friends who started playing games with each other... a friendship that started online became this channel that’s now one of the biggest entertainment properties in the UK. The key to that is familiarity: it’s being real, it’s being authentic. It’s entirely basing the content on their own love for it rather than trying to make something that isn’t true to themselves.”

High production values also help with launching new videos on YouTube. The Sidemen have 35 people in their production team, a studio in east London and several videographers on every shoot.

TikTok star Grace Keeling, aka GK Barry, has just herself and her management team. She told Atalla how she hit the big time: “It was complete accident. At a time when TikTok was a thing during lockdown and that wasn’t a job... I just started doing videos about how tragic my life was; embarrassing things that happened to me – it just completely blew up from there.”



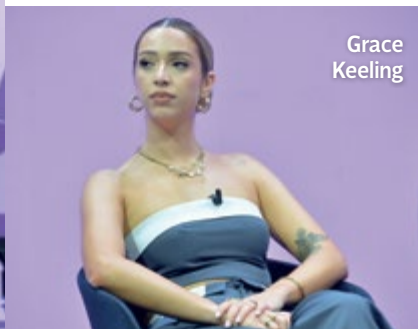
Atalla asked what she had learned that helped her videos take off. “I think the reason social media creators can sell stuff is because we’re relatable – people trust us because we’re very open, we put ourselves out there.

“When it comes to promoting something, I just have to do it my own way, then people will watch it. Whereas if I use certain briefs, it won’t have the same shtick. If something’s fake, people won’t be interested.”

“What are you learning about the kind of things your fans want?” asked Atalla. “I’ve learned that people love tragedy. If I’ve had a horrible day and



Ash Atalla



Grace Keeling



Jordan Schwarzenberger



Rajiv Nathwani

All pictures: Richard Kendal

“Our marketing has two parts to it: one is on the service, on the Netflix product itself, the personalisation and the recommendation on there. That is our most powerful marketing tool,” explained Nathwani. “The top 10 has been helpful for people to understand what’s popular and trending. The better it gets to know you, the better it gets to know your tastes.”

“Then, there’s what we do off service and the way we think about that is earning our way into culture rather than buying ourselves into awareness. For me, it’s less about big billboard campaigns telling people this is on Netflix this coming weekend.”

Instead, he said, it is about “not front-loading campaigns, it’s waiting until the show launches on Netflix. [Then] listening to how consumers are engaging, thinking about what’s resonating with them, then using that to create our marketing campaigns in real time.”

With *Squid Game*, there were no billboards. “We didn’t see that one coming,” he admitted, but Netflix used “iconography” from the show and quickly set up real-world ways for fans to interact and amplify it. There were stunts such as having dolls from the show in shopping centres around the country so people could create TikTok dances with them.

At Netflix, often about 50% of the marketing budget is kept for work after a show’s launch. Part of the reason, said Nathan, is: “We’re in a world of TikTok, where everyone is a content creator.”

His team looks for things people are using from Netflix shows on social media: “How are they using the audio, how are they duetting with the scenes, what are the scenes that resonate and how do you help fans of the show then take that content and give it a life of its own?”

He denied that the algorithm commissions shows: “It’s not commissioning by algorithm, it’s data to inform judgement... We have a commissioning team based here and they’re humans.”

To laughter from the audience, Atalla

joked: “I don’t know, I’ve met some of them, they’re not human.”

The panel then discussed what broadcasters can learn from the new platforms. “Should broadcasters be using TikTok to try things out?” Atalla asked. “Do you think: ‘What are they doing spending a year to make something that turns out to be shit?’”

“One hundred per cent,” replied Schwarzenberger, who recalled going to an ITV Studios event and asking why they were not using short form, “where you can, for the fraction of the budget, test and see if the show can resonate?”

Keeling reminded the convention that specialist platform experience was needed. She found it harder to reach people when she launched a YouTube channel.

“TikTok, when you do a video, it’s very easy to go viral, you can use a trending sound [or] talk about a topic that’s trending and you know you’re going to get views,” she said.

“[On] YouTube...you’ve got to post a video, but market it a different way because people aren’t going to stumble across it.”

Schwarzenberger concurred, revealing that *The Sidemen* have three people working solely on YouTube thumbnail images.

Ahmed warned that leaving the launch of something to algorithms alone is not enough because it requires “the time-tested ingredient of human affinity” overlaid with fundamental marketing principles. He highlighted *Hit Makers* author Derek Thompson’s aphorism as a starting point: “To sell something surprising, make it familiar, but to sell something familiar, make it surprising.” ■

Session Twelve, ‘How to launch new’, was chaired by Ash Atalla, CEO of Roughcut Television. The panellists were: Ajaz Ahmed, Founder and CEO, AKQA; Grace Keeling aka GK Barry, comedian, digital creator and presenter; Rajiv Nathwani, Senior Director, Marketing, Netflix UK/IE/IL; and Jordan Schwarzenberger, Co-founder, Arcade Media, The Sidemen. The producer was Diana Muir. Report by Tara Conlan.

‘I’VE LEARNED THAT PEOPLE LOVE TRAGEDY... IF I’VE HAD A GREAT DAY, NO ONE CARES. PEOPLE LOVE A BIT OF TRAUMA’

I’m ready to call it quits... that will go viral, 100%. A million views. If I’ve had a great day, no one cares. People love a bit of trauma.”

Atalla pointed out that she was the right person at the right time. “It’s about timing,” agreed Keeling, joking: “Thank God for Covid. I know I shouldn’t say that. Everyone was on their phones and now I have a career.”

Why is it that Netflix sometimes launches shows with very little fanfare, and sometimes with a lot, Atalla asked Rajiv Nathwani, the streamer’s Senior Director of Marketing for the UK, Ireland and Israel.

Bryan Lourd

in conversation
with

Emma Thompson

The agent extraordinaire and the double Oscar winner discuss why creativity comes first

There was no closer pair of speakers on the stage at Cambridge than Bryan Lourd, co-chairman of Creative Artists Agency (CAA) and his good friend, the double Oscar winner Emma Thompson. This was fitting as the duo discussed the need for creatives and executives to work effectively together for the benefit of all.

Lourd, who, for nearly three decades has been the boss at CAA – whose clients range from Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg to Ava DuVernay and Zendaya – lamented the existing division he perceives between the creative minds – writers, actors, crew – and the business end of the operation.

He said: “We have slipped in the past 10 years into an executive mentality that has been all about business, about mergers and acquisitions, data and analytics. The people who make the mistake to over-index lose the great opportunity they have of being in this industry to foster ideas.

“A lot of business people have infiltrated our worlds now. The thing I think is dangerous about the time that we’re living in is all the talk of data, algorithms and this analysis of formulae of what people want to see or don’t want to see.”

One problem cited by Thompson was



the language used in the meeting rooms, including one particular word: “When I hear people talk about ‘content’, it makes me feel like the stuffing inside a sofa cushion. Content? What do you mean, content? It’s just rude, actually.

“It’s just a rude word for creative people. I know there are students in the audience: you don’t want to hear your stories described as ‘content’ or your acting or your producing described as ‘content’. That’s just like coffee grounds in the sink or something.

“It is, I think, a very misleading word. It [reflects] the way in which the executives speak to creatives, the way in which we have to understand one another and combine better.”

She added that her experience of mentoring a young actor had given her insight into the often strained relationship between talent and executives. “You find your audience by being completely authentic,” she said. “These formulae don’t work... And then you sit there and you watch them and you

wonder why, at the end of it, you feel a bit ill.

“I think that’s something else that we don’t talk about as creators in television and film. How does it make us feel inside ourselves after we’ve seen something?”

“I want to feel different after I’ve watched something. I don’t want to feel the same way. I want to feel as though I’ve been shifted slightly, even if it’s just my mood or I’ve learned something extraordinary. That is something we just have to keep on thinking about – because it takes you away from this thing of ‘content’. What is the story that you want to hear and that you want to tell that you think will make people feel different, safer, stronger?”

The pair shared how influential TV had been on each of their very different childhoods. For Thompson, the daughter of *The Magic Roundabout* narrator Eric Thompson and actor Phyllida Law, it was “stuff like *The Jewel in the Crown* and *I, Claudius*”.



Richard Kendall

Lourd compared the thrill of the odd sitcom turning up on one of two channels in the small Louisiana town of his youth. “The world of television has only become more important as we’ve all grown and gotten older,” he said.

He reflected that the need for collaboration between different parts of the industry will become even more important once the writers’ and actors’ strikes are resolved: “There is an urgency on all our parts to take these relationships and partnerships much more seriously, in a way that has never been true before.”

He commended those creatives who already take the business end of

the operation as seriously as he does: “Great artists, the ones I’ve been fortunate enough to work with, really do have the part of the brain to say: ‘So, can you explain exactly...’ what we’re up against and what they need, and what they don’t need, then you can factor that into your approach.”

Lourd and Thompson agreed on the need to encourage young people starting out from both ends of the business to diversify and learn a wide range of skills. Thompson spoke of her own career, in which she’d had the chance to try everything from comedy to tap-dancing to period drama.

Lourd compared this with today’s model: “Nowadays, people tend to hit

‘WHEN I HEAR PEOPLE TALK ABOUT “CONTENT” IT MAKES ME FEEL LIKE THE STUFFING INSIDE A SOFA CUSHION’

so early on TikTok or YouTube, and we all take them down some road and expect them to be a certain thing; if there aren’t good executives, if there isn’t good infrastructure around them, we’re all going to miss out on what could turn into a very versatile artist who has certain different colours.”

Thompson recalled her own encounter with a well-established star at the height of his fame on a long-running hit TV comedy: “I can remember going on and doing a tiny part in *Cheers* when I was in my twenties and I remember meeting Ted Danson. He was one of the nicest people in the world, and one of the most unhappy, because he’d been doing it for so long. And I remember looking at him and thinking: ‘Why are you so unhappy?’ It was because he wanted to be able to do other things, but this had defined him for such a long time – he couldn’t get out of it.”

Finally, Lourd proved he is putting his own deep resources where his mouth is, making CAA a company where “you could start as a person out of college on a training programme, and work in any area you wanted to” – and also creating a school to help young people in his native Louisiana as well as in New York.

“I grew up in a small town and 567 people graduated from my high school; 27 went to college and three people went out of state, and everyone else stayed. So most of the people who didn’t go to college were the beneficiaries of the trade schools, where they taught the oil industry, farming, the things that were in my part of the US.

“At our business in Los Angeles, there wasn’t a proper school for ninth to 12th graders to learn all the below-the-line trades, and so a group of us started this school a year and a half ago, and we partnered with the union IATSE (International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees).

“As kids graduate, they will be able to go into internships and into one of the nine other divisions. It’s in Louisiana and it’s in New York as of two days ago; it’s fun, it’s the most satisfying thing we can possibly do.” ■

In Session Thirteen, the Co-Chair of Creative Artists Agency, Bryan Lourd, was in conversation with actor and screenwriter Emma Thompson. The producer was Helen Scott. Report by Caroline Frost.



Greg Dyke



Andy Coulson



Caroline Kean

How to handle a media firestorm

As the allegations against Russell Brand circled the broadcasters gathered at Cambridge, there was particular interest in this session about – as the panel chair, John Gapper, put it with an ironic smile – “the incredibly unlikely situation” in which a media crisis erupts involving a well-known TV figure.

Saying as little as possible seemed to be the best way to deal with a crisis, according to the panel of three experienced crisis managers: former BBC DG Greg Dyke, lawyer Caroline Kean and ex-*News of the World* editor and Down-Street adviser turned communications consultant Andy Coulson.

The trio were presented with a fictional scenario involving a judge called Alice on talent show *Starmaker*. They were asked to roleplay how the show’s producer, the broadcaster’s lawyer and

Three crisis managers bring their experience to an evolving scenario involving a TV celebrity

the show’s press team would respond. It began with Alice telling producers she wanted to miss the live final as her teenage daughter was in hospital because of a mental health crisis.

Alice had missed a pre-recorded show before because of her daughter, with the press office releasing a statement at the time stating that one of her children was unwell. But things had escalated, and Alice wanted to protect her daughter’s privacy. Complicating matters was Alice’s alcohol problem.

Giving the thoughts of the broadcaster’s lawyer, Kean laid out the privacy issues. As Alice’s daughter is 17,

she is still a minor. A number of the codes set by press regulator IPSO refer to 16 as “the limit for intrusion”, but she would still be treated as a minor and, as an individual, “even if she is an adult, her mental health, her wellbeing, is a matter of the utmost privacy”.

The broadcaster had “a duty of care to Alice” and should “respect her trust... as well as balance the interests of the show and the other judges. But looking after her is the primary concern.”

Asked for the producer’s viewpoint, Dyke said what he would be thinking was: “If Alice is not going to do the final, then who is?”

Gapper said a press announcement would have to be made. Coulson’s advice was to say “as little as possible”. It was a mistake that “the child was referenced” in the first statement: “I would... go with phrasing around private family issues, something along those lines.”



John Gapper

All pictures: Richard Kendall

He added: “The other rule of statement-writing that I like to follow is, remove all drama.”

Gapper noted, however, that the drama was exactly what the media would highlight. “Of course, but you’re not in control of that. What you have got control of is your statement and that’s the golden rule during any kind of crisis. Work out what you do have control of and what you don’t, and concentrate on the things that you do,” advised Coulson.

Dyke said the broadcaster should announce the “new presenter at the same time – because that’s the bigger story”.

Coulson suggested that it was important to build trust between the media, the PR and Alice, and he would ask her: “What do you want?”

Gapper added a new conundrum to the mix: a journalist had rung the press office claiming that a production source had alleged that Alice was struggling with alcohol again.

Kean said she would be looking at any previous stories and interviews about Alice’s drinking to see if it “has been publicly discussed”. Dyke said it was unlikely the journalist would pursue the story having got it from just one source.

Coulson was asked by Dyke if he would have run such a story from a single source when he was editor of the

News of the World. “No, you need to establish the facts,” said Coulson, adding it often then comes down to “relationships – who knows who, who can talk to who in a way that’s got some trust around it; [and involving] a journalist who understands what a background briefing or off-the-record statement is.”

If Coulson were representing Alice, he said, he would ask her: “What do you want to end up with? I imagine it would be: ‘I want my daughter to be protected.’” He said she might decide it would be better to have the stories about her drinking emerge if it meant her daughter was not mentioned.

The story was moved on by Gapper, who said Alice’s ex, with whom she had experienced a difficult divorce, had tweeted that “the chickens always come home to roost”. The panel agreed this was invading the daughter’s privacy.

There then ensued an amusing exchange between Gapper – playing Bill, one of Alice’s *Starmaker* co-judges and a long-term colleague of Dyke’s fictitious producer – exploiting their friendship to persuade him to reveal what was really going on.

The audience was given the chance to vote on whether Bill should be told, and agreed with Dyke that he should tell Bill only what had already been said publicly.

Gapper announced that the story continued to escalate, with the press looking for evidence of Alice’s drinking and Bill trying to veto her replacement, Helen – something Kean said he would not have a right to do unless it was in his contract.

Adding to the chaos, the ex-husband then gave a tabloid interview in which he alleged that producers turned a blind eye to Alice’s drinking during the filming of *Starmaker*.

“All they’ve got is an embittered ex-husband’s allegation,” said Dyke. Coulson agreed: “We’re forgetting here that the editor of this tabloid newspaper, if things have been handled properly, is aware that this is a pretty messy situation and children are involved... you’re guiding them away from creating a real problem for themselves.”

Kean said that, although the ex was “making libellous allegations about a professional production company”, she would not send “a lawyer’s letter” as this can make it look as though there is something to hide.

Further developments in the story included Alice wondering if she should go public with the story about her daughter, which Coulson and Dyke advised against. As Dyke noted wryly: “All stories go away in the end. Except a few... which we both know about.”

Kean pointed out that the daughter would be entitled to stop the story and that it would destroy her relationship with her mother.

Gapper put the final scenario to the panel: a journalist claimed to have pictures of Alice’s daughter in a private hospital and the name of the hospital had been posted on social media.

“No one’s going to publish that photo,” said Coulson, although he conceded that they might have 30 years ago. “Pre-1998, you might have run a story like that,” agreed Kean, but “now, with privacy laws”, Alice would be able to go for an injunction.

Dyke recalled that, after he left the BBC, there was a photo in a newspaper of him on holiday on an inflatable banana with his children: “I got the press office to ring them up and say: ‘You can’t do that, they’re my kids.’ They said: ‘We didn’t know they were his kids.’ To which I said: ‘Well, I

wasn’t going to go and sit on a banana with [just] anybody’s kids!’ But, legally, they could’ve run that until 1998.”

Gapper wrapped up the session with a happy ending for all, including Alice moving on to make a documentary about teenage mental health. ■

‘WORK
OUT WHAT
YOU DON’T
CONTROL, AND
CONCENTRATE
ON THE
THINGS THAT
YOU DO’

Session Fourteen, ‘Crisis = danger + opportunity’, was chaired by FT business columnist John Gapper. The panellists were Andy Coulson, founder, Coulson Partners; Greg Dyke, ex-BBC DG and CEO, LWT; and Caroline Kean, Consultant Partner, Wiggan LLP. The producers were Diana Muir, Lisa Campbell and ITN team. Report by Tara Conlan.



AI: friend or foe?

Generative artificial intelligence is banging on TV's door. How afraid should we be?

A funny thing happened on the stage of *America's Got Talent* in 2022. Tom Graham brought gasps from the audience when, with the aid of a talented performer and a lot of deep-fake technology, he brought a vision of Simon Cowell to life, apparently singing a ballad while swinging his arms around. Cowell looked equally bewildered and impressed, before asking: "Is it in appropriate to fall in love with a contestant?"

Fifteen months later, during a thought-provoking session on generative artificial intelligence in Cambridge, Graham – the CEO and co-founder of Metaphysic, which developed the software for his *America's Got Talent* stunt – explained that it wouldn't be long

before such tools were at everyone's fingertips.

"Everything about the content creation process is going to change quite rapidly over the next two, five, 10 years," he said. "Slowly these tools will become available to regular people, who will be able to create Hollywood-quality content in their basement. It will feature their favourite characters from the cinematic universes they love, and they can put themselves in the content."

In this session, Herman Narula, Co-founder and CEO of London-based tech company Improbable, was still glowing from a recent success: "Last night, we broadcast our first Major League Baseball game. We put a group of about 1,500 fans all around the world simultaneously into a virtual

From left on the stage:
 Convention Chair
 Alex Mahon with Tom
 Graham; Herman Narula,
 Grace Boswood, Nick
 Kwek and Kamal Ahmed.
 On screen, Mahon's
 image from the camera
 trained at the podium
 is being manipulated
 by Metaphysic's AI
 technology to alter her
 appearance and voice
 in real time



Richard Kendall

ballpark and recorded the telemetry (a collection of data at remote points) and movement of all the players. We handled 20 billion messages a second; we were able to use AI to predictably determine where those messages were going to go.”

For Narula, this is a key example of where AI might allow the entertainment industry to develop: “Populating interactive experiences is extremely expensive in terms of content – most big-budget video games cost hundreds of millions of dollars – so, if you can take the cost of content down, you can make interactive experiences – which all data shows us are far more engaging – much more available to people.

“If you combine that with technology like ours, we can have stadiums full of thousands of people engaging in

[interactive] environments. I think sports broadcasters and content creators need to use AI, of course, but they’ve also got to be thinking in terms of interactive experiences.”

No one on the panel, which included Grace Boswood (Technology Director of Channel 4) and Kamal Ahmed (Co-founder, The News Movements) was under any illusion that AI will not fundamentally change every aspect of the television industry.

Narula referenced a friend, a classical scholar, who had written a dissertation on specific deaths in the work of the poet Virgil, and set Narula’s software the challenge of replicating the work. He recalled: “In three hours, it came to the same conclusions he had in a year. To look at this as anything other than a disruption on the order of magnitude of the steam engine...

“We do everyone a disservice if we are not honest with them; this isn’t going to be like last time, this isn’t going to be just more of the same. It’s going to be something else, it’s going to be weird and it’s going to be a stretch.”

Graham agreed: “It took us 100 years to move society to adapt to the changes through the industrial revolution; I think we’re going to see the same order of magnitude of change happen in the next 10 to 15 years.

Ten years from now, probably 90% or more of everything that every single person on earth looks at on screen will be some form of AI-generated pixels, whether that’s coming to you through VR or a screen, or you’re listening to it.

“People who serve up content are going to have massive control over what we believe in and what we value, because our experience of reality is going to be largely augmented by AI-generated content that we consume every day.”

He added: “The things to look out for are – how can you use AI to create content more effectively? Because, if you don’t, someone else will, and quickly.”

Ahmed stressed the importance for leaders of all media organisations to recognise the magnitude of potential change and harness it. He said: “You

have to think strategically, firstly about your purpose. What are you here to do before you even discuss what generative AI is?”

“You can start thinking about what generative AI can do to help you, and there are fantastic advantages to generative AI for us as a creative business. For example, we are already testing when we upload a video on to Developer with Yahoo, we need to create captions from that content, and we need to create metadata from that content. [Currently], that is a [manual], relatively laborious, job.

“AI can help do that laborious, commoditised job for you as a business. Also, we’re looking at how it can help with accessibility; so, we write in English – how can we create other languages and other language content for what we do?”

Boswood explained how AI could help with

time-intensive processes for a broadcaster: “We need to work out where the parts of our workload are non-differentiating or constraining our opportunities. If you can solve that problem and get through that workload more quickly, that will create a differentiator for our business and stop the constraint.”

She cited how rig cameras had previously revolutionised where factual teams could film: “Suddenly, you had access in hospitals, schools, and loads of new programmes came out of it.” And she posed the question: “What is the equivalent in the production workload that AI can unlock? Is it casting, editing, massive data processing? That is the really creative opportunity here, and that must be built on.”

With such opportunities also come responsibilities and risks. When moderator Nick Kwek raised the prospect of many jobs being lost in this new era, Boswood, framed it as an evolution rather than an exodus.

“I’m not pretending that all the skills that we need now will be needed within 10 to 15 years,” Boswood said. “We’ve got a whole load of people who need creative skills in order to make this technology work, so [there will be a need] for lots of new training. ▶

10 YEARS FROM NOW... 90% OF EVERYTHING... ON SCREEN WILL BE SOME FORM OF AI-GENERATED PIXELS’

**'PEOPLE WHO
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WHAT WE VALUE'**

► “In the near term, you combine the skills of design and curation with personal and social media. There’s a massive explosion in value here that we need more people, not fewer people, to do. The new technology is going to enable us.”

The US actors’ strike has highlighted the concerns of all performing artists of having their likenesses ripped off and harvested by AI. Ahmed reflected: “There’s a very big discussion for us to have as a creative industry around how we are going to create the opportunities that you so excitingly described...”

“How are you thinking about that notion of the manipulated world ripping off the work of people who are then not included in or remunerated for the work you’re doing?”

For Graham, safeguards were key. He explained: “At the heart of enabling and empowering people – including actors, performers and regular people – as this technology comes at scale to all of us, is to allow people to have control over their data being used to train these algorithms. Also, to provide them with pathways and remedies to control how their likenesses, their voices, etc, may be used.

“In the case of actors, it might be their performance that’s been used. There will be contracts going

backwards and forwards, so there’s quite a lot of clarity on some level. For society [as a whole], it will be damaging if all of us give up all our data to large technology companies to own, to do as they want with us, probably create content and market it back to us. We should all own and control our data and that should be the fundamental concern.”

Ahmed saw challenges with this. “We’ve been through this before, with people just giving up their data to allow social media to exist, and we’ve seen some of the huge negatives that have come from people not understanding what you’re even asking them to give up. To put the responsibility on the individual is going to be a difficult conversation...”

Worse still, Ahmed added, AI, being based on human-created data, is just as susceptible to “problems that we all have as human beings; racism, ableism, sexism, misinformation...”

Another challenge is that, with open-source developers using such technology to create deepfake pornography or political information – most people have already marvelled at the Tom Cruise-alike visible on TikTok – the capacity for ill-harm will become exponential. While the panellists touched on regulation, both Narula and Graham stressed the limitations of what will be possible.

Narula suggested: “What we should legislate for is outcomes, for me trying to copy your face, we can stop that. But trying to worry about the method, the machine, the device, or any AI, it’s just impossible now.”

Graham said that he had recently been down this road himself: “Three months ago, I registered copyright in the AI version of myself, trying to get the remedy of takedowns (within 24 hours) for infringement of registered copyright under US law. I’m waiting for the copyright office in the US to come back to say whether I can register my copyright of the AI version of myself.

“So that’s an existing legal instrument that we can co-opt to enable individuals to have rights and remedies to address some of the outcomes of the technology. But the technology, the open-source community, it is not going anywhere. Development is not just happening in big companies, it is happening everywhere all at once.”

Thought-provoking, paradigm-shifting stuff, all in all. As Boswood summed up, “We need to work out a way to do this safely and carefully... all I would ask of this room is, you need to learn and listen and stay in touch with it, otherwise you will get taken over.”

For Ahmed, enabling the tools of AI to serve the TV industry, as for every other, must be the aspiration, and he pointed out the USP of human endeavour. “The more of your business in the creative industry that you do by AI, the more it can be copied by another business. The more of your business that is human talent supported by AI, the more defensible it is as a model, because AI can’t send one of our reporters to Syria to find out the latest about the Isis camps.

“Things that you can do as human beings are incredibly valuable, so that’s how we approach it.” He quoted another industry executive who had reminded him: “AI can’t put up a camera in a hurricane.” ■

In Session Fifteen, ‘AI: Friend or foe?’, the panellists were: Kamal Ahmed, Co-founder and Editor-in-Chief, The News Movement; Grace Boswood, Technology Director, Channel 4; Tom Graham, CEO and Co-founder, Metaphysic; and Herman Narula, Co-founder and CEO, Improbable. The chair was technology journalist Nick Kwek. The producer was Diana Muir. Report by Caroline Frost.

Shutterstock



Richard Kendall

James Corden in conversation with Boyd Hilton

Many British entertainers have crossed the pond in search of fame and fortune in the uniquely competitive US TV market, but few have been as successful as James Corden and returned to the UK looking so at ease with themselves.

In conversation with Boyd Hilton, Entertainment Director, Heat, he told the RTS in the Convention's final session, his first interview since coming home to England after eight years hosting *The Late Late Show* for CBS: "The other day, we were back at the very place we left when we went to America and my wife, Jools, said: 'It's so weird that we're back.' I said: 'I don't know that it's weird that we're back, it feels weird that we ever went.'"

He continued: "It feels such a strange thing to have done for eight years. It feels like you were picked up in a plane and... I'd never done anything like it

The 'talk show king' returns to the UK and urges commissioners to back young talent and know their audience

'I DON'T KNOW THAT IT IS WEIRD THAT WE'RE BACK, BUT IT FEELS WEIRD THAT WE EVER WENT'

before... I'd never interviewed anyone before... I was convinced the show would be pulled after six months."

Self-deprecating and seemingly unaffected by becoming the toast of LA, Corden's amiable and approachable persona was much in evidence as he gave an insider's account of what it was like to be part of the Hollywood star-schmoozing machinery and shared his views on how creativity should be nurtured in TV.

As for his own remarkable comedic chops, these were on show as he recalled what it felt like to take to the skies in a fighter jet piloted by no lesser figure than Tom Cruise, all memorably filmed for *The Late Late Show*.

"A few days before [the flight], I had a genuine worry. I ended up going, like: 'He's an actor, he's not a pilot.' [laughter] Like, respectfully, it's just the two of us in an aeroplane. If something happens, then we die."

"And worse than my own death is my children growing up and people going: 'Their dad killed Tom Cruise.'"

▶ Corden said that he tried to back out of the stunt but the star called him and said: “James, your life is more valuable than mine. You are never in danger... I would never do this if I was not flying every day. I am completely match fit. You don’t have to worry.”

Corden said: “My God, what a thing to have done. If I look back on the show – which I don’t know even now if I can, because it was only at the end of April – it is an overwhelming feeling of ‘I genuinely don’t know what I’ve done to deserve such memories.’ It was very difficult to leave, but I felt compelled to come home.”

A staple of CBS’s schedule since 1995, *The Late Late Show* was reinvented by Corden and his executive producer, Ben Winston, for the age of social media. Yet talk shows are nothing unless they give their audiences a steady supply of stars. Hilton wanted to know how the actor, who, 23 years ago was nominated for an RTS New-comer award for his role in Kay Mellor’s ITV drama *Fat Friends*, had persuaded so many A-listers to join him at Television City.

Corden said a lot of it was about making his guests feel appreciated and “creating a safe environment that was celebratory”. Details such as renovating the dressing rooms to make them comfortable for the star and their entourage – including make-up artists and publicists – made a “huge difference if you’re asking guests for more time, which, inevitably, we always were”.

Corden said he experienced some stage fright at the thought of inheriting *The Late Late Show* mantle: “It was pretty terrifying, especially at the start. My daughter, Carey, was 12 weeks old. It was all very overwhelming. We couldn’t book any guests on the show. Publicists were saying: ‘We’ll wait and see what the show is like.’”

He continued: “No one knows us here [but] I think I’ve learned enough, either from being in plays or writing *Gavin & Stacey* or the 30 or so episodes of *A League of Their Own* that I’ve hosted.... Hang on, we can really build

something interesting here.” The objective was to make a series that could embrace the internet. “Yes, the show’s on at 12:30am,” he explained, “but there’s an audience here that are still watching content, they’re just not consuming it in a linear-broadcast fashion.

“Maybe we make a show that launches at 12:37 on CBS but is available to watch all day and all night wherever you are. [During] your commute into work, your lunch break, whenever. It’s about creating your hour (which, after ad breaks, comes down to about 42–43 minutes) – how do we slice this up to be consumed in the day?”

going to work... I’m not in an overwhelming rush... I would hate not to be there right now for our family...”

Britain remains gripped by a seemingly endless economic crisis and train and doctors’ strikes, but Corden was thrilled to return to what he considers to still be a green and pleasant land. “I wish you could see this island from a distance,” said the co-writer and star of *Gavin & Stacey*, one of the most successful TV comedies of the past 20 years.

“It’s unbelievable, it’s amazing, the architecture, the people and the creativity and the things that we make. The

size of the country versus its output is extraordinary.

“I just felt compelled to come home to try and see if there might be one more thing that I could do, safe in the knowledge that there might not be.”

Corden emphasised: “I’m very purposefully trying to not do anything for a minute,” adding that he was “thinking a lot about half-hour comedies”.

The secret to a successful half-hour comedy was a “found family in predominantly three locations”.

“I think *The Bear* (the highly rated FX series) is closer to *Taxi* than any of us could imagine,” he opined. “And arguably, *The Bear* is at its weakest when they leave those three locations. When you think about *Friends* or

The Office or *Porridge* or *Open All Hours* or *Dad’s Army*, these people are found family in predominantly three locations. Gavin and Stacey’s two families become one family and their friends become a family.”

What’s going on his brain at the moment, probed Hilton? “Boxes... and new schools... [The Late Late Show] was lot of TV... 1,100 episodes is arguably 800 too many.”

He implied that he was not interested in being involved in shows that were sequels or prequels. Reading

‘IT IS IMPORTANT THAT SHOWS ARE COMMISSIONED BY PEOPLE WHO LOVE THEM’



‘RUTH AND I WOULD LOVE TO MAKE SOMETHING TOGETHER AGAIN’

“We quickly realised that if you call a segment something – *Carpool Karaoke* or *Drop the Mic* – it will travel much quicker [on social media].”

Part of that strategy involved building a digital team for the five-nights-a-week show and considering which night to air certain shows, because, Corden said, fewer people watched on a Friday than the middle of the week.

Would he do something again in the talk show space? “Maybe. I don’t even see it as my choice... I’d be open to anything. I just enjoy trying things and



'1,100 SHOWS IN EIGHT YEARS IS ARGUABLY 800 TOO MANY'

James Corden hosting
The Late Late Show

CBS

from his mobile, and to audience applause, Corden quoted Walt Disney telling his shareholders in 1966: "We will always look for new ideas and new stories."

"If I was running a network or a channel, I'd bet on youth every day of the week," he said. "If you bet on youth and it doesn't work... there's honour in that. If you bet on youth and it works, you look like a genius. Deep down, we all know no one is."

Pointing to the *The Office* producer, Ash Atalla, sitting in the front row, Corden said: "I think about Ricky [Gervais] and Stephen [Merchant] writing, directing, and producing *The Office*. An extraordinary thing to give to two guys who'd done a radio show on XFM."

"Ruth [Jones] and I writing *Gavin & Stacey*...The BBC's absolute wave of support behind us. We didn't really get notes. The BBC used to go: 'It's your show. You know it better than we do. These are some suggestions.'"

"In this period now, where notes start to become almost instructions, that's really dangerous for creative people. If you back someone to make a show you should back them absolutely and unequivocally, safe in the knowledge that it might not work, and you might lose your job."

Was he inspired by *The Bear*? "I believe that FX, which is run by John Landgraf, is the most extraordinary network. I think the average employee time span at FX is something like eight years."

"The biggest lesson you can take from FX is that they fundamentally know who their audience are. They're not seeking a newer and broader one..."

"John once said to me: 'The thing I say most in my office is, "This is fantastic, it's not for us.'" I don't know if you see that, particularly across a lot of the streamers, where sometimes it feels like a race for a press release without a thought of: 'Well, actually when this is finished, is this right for our audience?'"

"The more you can know exactly who your audience are, you're going to stand a much better chance of having hit shows."

"ITV is a great example of that. ITV absolutely knows who its audience are. They understand who they are, the advertisers know who they are. That's why they have great success with *I'm a Celebrity*...*Get Me Out of Here!* – 20 years on TV!"

It is important that shows are commissioned by people who love them and not because they are only relying on data. "HBO commissioned *The*

Sopranos because someone loved it... By today's metrics, the volume of shows that would have been pulled after six episodes... extraordinary shows that never had the time, never had the backing of true creatives. I'd ask commissioners: 'Do you like it?'"

Gavin & Stacey had started out as a largely unhyped show on BBC Three and ended up pulling in millions on BBC One. The critically acclaimed 2019 Christmas special achieved an average audience of 11.6 million.

Please resolve that cliff-hanger, urged Hilton; the show ended quite brilliantly as Nessa [Ruth Jones] is seen proposing to Corden's character, Smithy, getting down on one knee. "I genuinely don't know if we'll ever do another one," replied the star. "I think Ruth and I would love to make something together again. I don't know if that will be *Gavin & Stacey*. We feel so proud of that last special. Maybe there's something truly perfect about it ending there. Can we truly fulfil people's ambitions for it? I don't know." ■

In Session Sixteen, James Corden OBE, writer, host and producer, was in conversation with Boyd Hilton, Entertainment Director, Heat. The producer was Phil Harris. Report by Steve Clarke.

The Steve Hewlett Memorial Lecture

John Ryley, Lyse Doucet and Steve Rosenberg confront the pressures on UK network news. First, Ryley makes his case for more rigorous royal reporting

The recently departed Head of Sky News was in combative mode as he outlined three recommendations to improve British broadcast journalism.

First, John Ryley said: “Broadcasters should start reporting on the Royal Family with the same rigour as they treat every [other] story on the news agenda.... They are too supine, too incurious, too compliant.

“The Royal Family and their spin doctors – whatever fancy titles they have – need to understand the age of editorial deference is well and truly over.” Citing the coronation of Charles as an example of the control Buckingham Palace seeks, he said: “[It] set out to totally dictate what could be broadcast... impos[ing] a series of extraordi-

what makes me so cross about it. It is a deliberate attempt to obfuscate how the thing works.

“Surely in a democracy, there must be accountability to the public, to understand the return on their investment?”

Later, during a Q&A, Sally Osman, who described herself as “one of those former spin doctors at the Royal Household” – in reality, she was Director of Royal Communications for HM Elizabeth II – took Ryley to task.

She said: “I don’t recognise the characterisation that you’ve drawn of what it’s like within the Palace. I certainly remember being on the receiving end of a lot of very, very tough questions.”

Osman pointed out that there is a formula for calculating the Sovereign Grant, which is “essentially based on the profits of the Crown Estate, which is

In defence of fearless journalism

nary restrictions on the use of the video, the pictures of this rare national event.

“Topics such as why King Charles didn’t pay any inheritance tax on the fortune he inherited from his mother... should be examined properly.

“The British monarchy receives taxpayer money through the Sovereign Grant, the monarchy’s annual budget. A Treasury review this summer revealed [that] the Royal Family’s grant is due to increase from £86m to £125m. The Sovereign Grant needs more scrutiny.

“Lord Turnbull, a former Cabinet Secretary, Whitehall’s most senior civil servant, accused the Treasury of seeking to obfuscate how the monarchy was funded. He told *The Guardian*: ‘You get people writing in saying that it was a good thing that the King was so sensitive to public opinion that he had waived some of the money he could have had.’

“Lord Turnbull went on: ‘I think it’s bollocks. It is deliberate – that’s really

doing exceptionally well. More money has gone into the pot recently because they’re refurbishing Buckingham Palace, which is essentially falling down.”

Addressing Ryley’s contention that there was a lack of accountability about the Royal finances, she added: “The Sovereign Grant has an annual report, which is published and laid before Parliament. There is a regular annual press conference [held] by the arcanelly named Keeper of the Privy Purse, who is, in essence, the [Royal] finance director, who takes questions from the media.

“When I was there we invited a lot of the financial media who know how to read a spreadsheet but they rarely came because, as you will know, a lot of the royal correspondents don’t like others invading their turf. And so the question I would throw back to you is: ‘For this level of interrogation, should the journalists be of the quality [to ask] the right questions of the institution?’”



John Ryley

Paul Hampartsoumian

Reporters ‘stuck in a time warp’

Fellow lecturer Lyse Doucet pressed John Ryley on his call for more rigorous royal reporting. He reiterated his belief that: ‘We’re stuck in a time warp and we need to move on – and now’s the time to start with the new reign.’

Ryley recalled a run-in with the Royal Household last January, when Sky News reporter James Matthews asked (the then) Prince Charles about Prince Andrew being stripped of his military titles. ‘Within a couple of hours I had an email: “How dare your correspondent do that!” I then got phoned

and was summoned to a meeting, which I didn’t go to.

‘They want the story told their way; they don’t really want to engage with journalistic rigour.’

Responding to a member of the audience who asked whether it was ‘fine if GB News goes to where Fox is now?’, Ryley replied: ‘My central point was that the [advertising] boycott is going to damage a start-up, and I’m sure GB News will evolve over time, just as Sky News and the BBC have evolved.’

Ryley said this was a “good point”.

In his lecture, Ryley had concluded his Royal recommendations with the proposal that: “The start of the Carolan era is a ripe moment to reassess our approach towards royal reporting... the Royal Household, too, needs to change its ways, allowing more access, answering difficult questions and taking accountability.

“Greater openness is not about stripping the monarchy of its dignity or disturbing royals’ personal privacy. It’s all about promoting a culture of openness that gives the public a truthful view of their monarchy.”

Ryley’s second recommendation was that broadcasters “should report less British politics to make it more relevant to the voters. Far too much airtime is focused on Westminster gossip... and not enough on the decisions the Government and parliament are taking. Broadcast journalists need to recommit to political reporting, offering facts and analysis that people can use to make decisions.”

Looking to the general election, he said: “Voters need to see the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition debate the big issues facing the country at election time. My message to the broadcasters: don’t overthink the election debates; keep it simple – just Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer, head to head.”

His final recommendation focused on free speech: “Today, a new ruling elite is trying to stifle freedom of expression in these islands.... A big group of advertising agencies have been mounting a boycott of ‘right-wing’ news outlets here in Britain.

“The self-styled ‘Conscious Advertising Network’ has boycotted the start-up GB News.... This action represents a threat to free speech, putting the business model of this start-up in jeopardy.

“Freedom of expression is vital to our democracy... And let’s be clear; the new news channels have been launched to satisfy an increasing thirst in the UK for a diversity of opinions. It’s an awkward fact for some – GB News’s audience is growing.

“The British public has the right to hear the full range of political perspectives. The advertising boycott of GB News should end. It is an insult to the British people.” ▶

BBC Chief International Correspondent Lyse Doucet argued that broadcast news was facing a series of existential threats.

“Our habit of sitting on the sofa to see what’s on the telly is changing fast,” she said. “Our future is, literally, in our hands, in those phones or other devices that so many of us are using to access news – or not – especially a younger generation,” who, she said were turning to TikTok and YouTube.

“News avoidance”, Doucet continued, is the “new catchphrase in our business”, pointing out that [deliberate] avoidance in the UK is among the highest in the world at “a whopping 41%.

“I get it... Sometimes I avoid news, too... Surveys tell us that an older generation finds news too depressing. A younger generation finds it too boring.”

Doucet identified other concerns: “Political polarisation... diminishing faith in institutions, the rise and rise of propaganda, or illiberal and autocratic governments, weaponising social media and artificial intelligence to undermine, if not destroy, democracy and dissent”

Referencing the three Rs from school – reading, writing and arithmetic – Doucet argued that focusing on news journalism’s own Rs – reach, relevance and reporters – offered hope.

“We need to go... where the young generation is... Take TikTok... it is used by more than one billion people around the world. The BBC as a public broadcaster hesitated... before engaging and then, when it did, recently, the graphs shot up... to sometimes hundreds of millions of views.”

Turning from reach to the subject of relevance, Doucet said: “When people feel the news matters to them, they come back... [Following] Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine... 81% of people in the UK said they were following the news closely.

“International news is not foreign news – it is news that is here and now... Covid 19, the attacks by so-called Islamic State, the climate crisis, migration, cyberattacks; none of this now happens only in countries which seem so far away... they’re our problems, our stories, too.



Paul Hampartsoumian

Reach, relevance and reporters

Lyse Doucet reflects on how to get through to news avoiders and young TikTokers

“[But audiences] don’t want just doom and gloom... they want to see the light in the dark. And, yes, even in the darkest places, we do find that light.”

On reporting, Doucet said: “The best way to challenge propaganda, to confront untruths, is to report: ‘I saw it with my own eyes.’ ‘I heard it with my own ears.’

“Artificial intelligence, the best search engines, can’t convey what fear tastes like when you are in a war zone, they don’t do empathy, they can’t sniff out a story or a scoop. They can’t feel the bottomless grief when you’re in the midst of an earthquake or an attack.”

She praised the work of the new BBC Verify unit, which combats disinformation by harnessing, among other things, open-source intelligence and satellite imagery.

“There is a sense that it’s not enough any more just to report; audiences want to know how [we] knew that or got to that conclusion,” said Doucet. “We have the best of what technology offers with the best of what humans have always offered – old fashioned, face-to-face journalism in the field, in the heat and dust, and in the cold and fear.” ▶

QUESTION & ANSWER

Q John Ryley: What still keeps you motivated?

A Lyse Doucet: It really matters... I’ve always seen my job as a foreign correspondent as... about narrowing the gaps between ‘them and us’, between ‘you and I’.

Going to one disaster after another over the years, I’ve come to understand that when you drill down into the story, no matter how complex and consequential [it] is, it’s a story about mothers and fathers, children, families, societies, streets and people’s hopes and dreams – not so different [to us].

Q John Ryley: Is it hard to get to the truth now?

A Lyse Doucet: People’s views are very stubborn... We need a diversity of opinions, but we don’t need a diversity of facts.

Steve Rosenberg explains why he has stayed on in Moscow despite the obstacles to reporting

Risk, rigour and Russia



BBC

QUESTION & ANSWER

Q John Ryley: How much day-to-day pressure do you feel from the Russian authorities?

A Steve Rosenberg: We're clearly made to feel the enemy [but] we don't get calls from the foreign ministry, so we don't feel pressure that way.

A Lyse Doucet: You never pull your punches... that's truly courageous.

A Steve Rosenberg: There's no point being a journalist here, if you can't tell the story as you see it... the sword of Damocles hangs over us constantly.

Q A Russian teacher in the audience: Since the invasion I've struggled with my own motivation to teach Russian... How do you find the motivation to keep going?

A Steve Rosenberg: I've spent more than half my life here... it's a country I fell in love with many years ago... and yet on 24 February last year, something awful happened that I didn't expect would happen and that's tested to the limits my love for this country...

But I haven't given up on Russia... I try to step back and take a historic view that this horror, this nightmare will be over at some point.

Report by Matthew Bell. The Steve Hewlett Memorial Lecture 2023 was held at the University of Westminster on 14 September, and produced by the RTS and the Media Society.

BBC News Russia editor Steve Rosenberg spoke via a sometimes erratic video link from Moscow, posing the question: "In today's Russia, does a foreign correspondent still have the opportunity to do journalism?"

Rosenberg joined the BBC's Moscow Bureau as a producer in 1997 "at a time when Russia and the West were still partners – it's very different now... in recent months, journalists from 'unfriendly' countries [largely the UK and the West] have been barred from major events such as the Victory Day Parade on Red Square."

"In the state media... anti-British rhetoric is off the scale because the UK is seen as one of the strongest supporters of Ukraine and, as a consequence, some Russian officials and commentators who used to... give us interviews now decline. Some western journalists have been forced to leave the country... *Wall Street Journal* reporter Evan Gershkovich was arrested and accused of spying – he remains locked up.

"It's important to stress, though, that

Russian journalists are in greater danger than foreign reporters.

"Reporting from Russia is challenging... the danger should be taken seriously and those risks should be reviewed regularly. But I believe it is more important than ever, if at all possible, to be here on the ground.

How else can you hope to understand what Russians are thinking... and how on earth this country... has taken such a dark path?

"I've heard it said that there's no point talking to people on the streets here... Russians are too scared to tell you what they really think and, yes, there is fear and there are many repressive laws to punish those who 'discredit the Russian Army'."

"Despite everything, there are still opportunities to do journalism in Russia; mind you, being here doesn't mean having inside knowledge of what's going to happen. Whenever I'm asked... how the war is going to end or what will happen to President Putin, my usual response is to throw up my hands in surrender and say: 'You know what? I haven't a clue.'" ■

“I absolutely hate rejection. I cry... I love these projects. I really hate it when producers act like it doesn't matter and say: ‘We just roll again tomorrow, Helen.’ Of course, you roll again tomorrow, but today I want to sob.”

Screenwriter Helen Black was discussing the biggest downside of her job at an RTS Futures event in September, which examined what it takes to make a living out of screenwriting.

She continued: “You end up working on a lot of projects that are never going to be in production and that's heartbreaking.”

But Black advised: “Try to forget about that and treat each project as if it's going to be on BBC One on a Sunday night. If you don't do that, you won't do a good job and you just won't enjoy it.”

While rejection is part of the writer's life, there are many more highs. Black had 11 novels under her belt when, wanting to move into TV, she submitted a script to a BBC Writersroom competition, won and found an agent. “One producer gave me an episode of [Channel 5 drama] *Clink* out of the blue,” said Black, “and each job builds to another”.

She went on to script the double-RTS Cymru Award winner *Life and Death in the Warehouse* for BBC Three and has co-written the second series of Jimmy McGovern's multi-award-winning BBC One prison drama *Time*.

Ameir Brown is one of the team scripting Steven Knight's Disney+ Victorian boxing drama *A Thousand Blows*. He has a BA in film-making from Birmingham City University and a screenwriting MA from London Film School.

“Going to film school is a



Time: series 2

BBC

How to write TV drama

From finding the right course and agent to dealing with rejection, **Matthew Bell** gets the inside track on scripting

personal decision,” he said. “I wouldn't say you absolutely need it, but for someone outside the London-centric bubble that is the TV industry in this country it can be helpful.”

He added that, while it had been worthwhile: “I've definitely learned more on the job and being in writers rooms, observing the process of more experienced writers... Also, being on set... is like an apprenticeship.”

On being a member of the *A Thousand Blows* writers room, he said: “Writing from someone else's vision is really helpful to learn your craft... writing on a show that's getting made, you're writing for a budget – that

teaches you a whole lot of important things... It's great to learn from some like Steven Knight.”

Writer/director Louis Paxton, who is helming a block of the BBC Three horror comedy *Wreck*, did a BA film course in Glasgow – he wanted to make films but didn't have the funds. “That was great because they had access to kit... they give you a bit of a budget to make your grad film as well.”

His graduation film got him on to an MA at the National Film and Television School in London. “What I learned at film school was invaluable.”

Getting on the books of an agent is often said to be a first

step for any budding screenwriter, but Brown advised: “As a new writer, the main thing you should focus on is your work, getting scripts in a great place... If the work is good, agents will come.”

He added: “Don't sign up if you're not ready and just sit there on their client's list, [with your scripts] gathering dust because you haven't got anything worthy enough to... put you forward for jobs.” ■

The RTS Futures event, ‘How to get into screenwriting’, was held online on 6 September and hosted by Navi Lamba, Head of Development, BBC Comedy, and produced by Laura Taylor and Daisy Church. It can be watched here: bit.ly/3rL60sa

Is there something in the water in Huyton? Following in the footsteps of Alan Bleasdale (*Boys from the Blackstuff*), and Tony Schumacher (*The Responder*), director Philip Barantini is the latest television talent from the streets of this Liverpool town, with his new BBC One four-parter *Boiling Point*.

It is a rollercoaster slice-of-life drama, set in the kitchen and front-of-house of a new high-end London restaurant, and Barantini described its unusual journey to the small screen.

The series, co-created and written by James Cummings, began life as a short, then was remade as a feature film, both captured in single takes.

"Normally, you would send in a pitch, have a chat, maybe get commissioned for a script," Barantini told RTS North West Chair Cameron Roach. "[But] Mona [Qureshi, then at the BBC, now a Netflix drama commissioner] got in contact with me after the film came out and asked if I'd be interested in turning it into a TV series."

Luckily for Barantini, producer-turned-drama commissioner Rebecca Ferguson took over from Qureshi, and already knew him: "She gave me my first crack at TV [directing]."

"When the first draft of the script arrived, it was my first week as drama commissioner," Ferguson told Roach. "It just had this thing that I personally am always looking for: total authorship, and authenticity."

Barantini's career journey was circuitous. His enthusiasm for the industry was sparked on a trip to Disneyland: "It was magical.... Then my great auntie took me to Granada Studios", and he realised that magic was created in the North West, too.



Boiling Point

BBC

Coming up to the boil

North West Carole Solazzo hears how a new BBC One drama made the transition from cinema to the small screen

He became an actor but was "always the guy who would stay behind on set after my scene, mithering the director, because I was so interested [in how it all worked]."

However, "I didn't believe that I could direct," he added, "because, as a kid from Huyton, my mentality was, 'I could never do that because direc-

still had this burning desire to work in the industry but it was getting further and further away from me." He pulled things round with the help of a therapist, determined now to focus on directing, but lack of confidence still held him back.

Until his mother died. "That changed everything,"

like this... attention to detail is essential. I wanted it to feel real and raw."

Roach asked whether it was "very bold for BBC One to back the vision and go to series television" – lacking as *Boiling Point* was in "traditional drama series technique".

Ferguson disagreed, citing *Clocking Off* and *Boys from the Blackstuff*.

"It's harking back to those TV series... the character-based dramas about real people's lives," she insisted. "They are people who are struggling, living on the edge, but in this incredible high-octane environment." ■

'LIVING ON THE EDGE IN A HIGH-OCTANE ENVIRONMENT'

tors have been to film school and they know everything"

"It's a barrier for working-class [people]," Ferguson agreed. "It's a middle-class thing... to go to film school."

Barantini was an actor for 20 years; at the start it went "incredibly well", but he started working in kitchens when roles began to dry up.

He "fell into drinking too much... I felt bitter because I

he recalled. "The worst thing in the world had happened. Nothing could faze me now."

The key, he insisted, is that a director "doesn't need to know everything... Surround yourself with people who know what they're doing... and collaborate with them."

On *Boiling Point*, this included consultant chefs advising the actors to "hold the spoon like that, or chop

The RTS North West event was held on 28 September at the Vue Cinema Salford Quays, hosted by Cameron Roach, RTS North West Chair and founder of Rope Ladder Fiction. It was produced by RTS North West in association with Beautiful Productions.



From left: Natalie Lyddon, Greg James, Rosie Gee, Munya Chawawa and Rebecca Dowell

John Stone

From TikTok to TV and – back

RTS London Matthew Bell discovers the platform is far more than a TV training ground

Frustrated that he couldn't get a break in TV, comedian Munya Chawawa took to impersonating celebrity offspring. "I was so desperate... I told a TV agent that I was Idris Elba's son, which obviously you can't verify until you see the person. I'd turn up and they'd say to me: 'Look. If you had 30,000 followers, maybe we'd talk to you. We like your showreel but you've got no profile.'"

Chawawa felt his comedy suited TikTok's "quick bursts of entertainment... Most videos have one punchline at the end, so my rule was that I was going to have 11 punchlines in 60 seconds."

He was talking at an RTS event, which highlighted how TikTok can help launch a career in television.

When he finally broke into TV, Chawawa rapidly made a name for himself, appearing on hit Channel 4 show *Taskmaster* and winning an RTS award for the YouTube series *Race Around Britain*.

But he is still a presence on TikTok. "Online is a powerful engine in terms of putting you in front of... commissioners and producers – it's an engine between big projects that lets people know I'm still out there," he said.

First and foremost, said Talent Director Rebecca Dowell from global agency YMU, she is looking for a "unique tone of voice and a creative USP", rather than a huge following. "But, for them to be suitable for representation, they would need to be at a certain level, so the 30,000 reference is quite a good starting point... they have obviously found traction with the audience."

She added: "Because on TikTok you can experiment creatively... instead of a showreel, talent can use it to build a creative portfolio."

Rosie Gee, Public Figure Partnerships Manager at TikTok, said: "On TikTok, your content doesn't need to be perfect... it's about being authentic and being yourself... and not overthinking it."

TV and radio can learn from social media, said BBC *Radio 1*

Breakfast DJ Greg James. "As well as listening to you, they are also on the phone endlessly, so you've got to be where the audience is. It would have been ridiculous if I'd gone: 'We're not doing TikTok – I don't understand it.' Well, then, get off the radio because you're not keeping up with the world... the radio show benefits from it."

James continued: "No one medium is better than another... if you came up through TikTok or Instagram, brilliant, well done. [The idea] that TV should be the [only] gateway... that's absolute bollocks – I hope that isn't happening any more."

Are either of the star panellists earning money from TikTok? Chawawa said: "I have not yet monetised my TikTok content; I use it more as a tool to put myself out there, then brands are able to

see that and say: 'He'll be great for the next Adidas campaign.'"

TikTok Creator Partner Manager Natalie Lyddon added: "From a creative perspective, there are so many ways you can make money... there are all these monetisation tools we have in apps."

James said: "I've always seen social media – because I've been lucky enough to have a daily radio show, which is my main platform – as a marketing tool. But also it's evolved and it generates content for the show."

"Remember, there's so much time," he said, addressing a woman struggling to break into TV. "I've been on Radio 1 for 16 years – it took me 12 years to get the breakfast show. There were moments on the way when I thought it would never happen... but it's so much better for waiting and working out who you are... So, take time, and enjoy all the bits along the way." ■

'TikTok talent: creating content for TV success' was held on 25 September at TikTok's London HQ. It was hosted by Edward Lindeman, Head of Entertainment and News Operations at TikTok, and produced by Damien Ashton-Wellman.

West of England's latest "Meet the commissioner" event took place this month at the Watershed in Bristol with Channel 4 Drama Commissioning Editor Gwawr Lloyd in conversation with Centre Chair Lynn Barlow.

Lloyd gave an in-depth look into the commissioning process, from the significance of producers – "one of the most important relationships a writer will have is with a producer" – to the time a show spends in development: "On average, [it's] three to four years before it hits the screen."

Channel 4's remit was key, said Lloyd: "[Our shows] need to deliver on so many fronts... inclusivity, regional-ity, [they should] be revelatory, funny, have something to say... We do need to tick all those boxes, because that's what makes us different from every other channel."

But Lloyd emphasised that "[although] all our shows have to work incredibly hard, they shouldn't feel like they're working hard when you're watching them".

One project that exemplifies Channel 4's remit is the forthcoming six-part



Remit is key to C4 greenlight

drama *The Gathering*. "It's got Liverpool on screen... It's an intergenerational drama and it's from the perspective of younger people.... It's got

such a diverse cast and a range of really relevant stories," said Lloyd.

Regionality is a big focus for Channel 4 and especially

for Lloyd. "Coming from Wales, I know how important it is to have access to training and opportunities that seem... incredibly difficult to get on if you don't know the right people... but you're still very, very talented and you want to stay where you live and tell stories about where you're from."

With this in mind, Lloyd helped to launch the Channel 4 TV Writers Scheme (West and South West) last year, having previously set up a similar scheme in Wales. Chris Yong, one of the alumni of the new scheme, said: "It felt very special to be in the room with this incredibly talented group of writers."

Another participant, Sharon Clark, said that the scheme "[helped] us to break down a wall that we didn't know how to get through.... Trying to get into television felt like every door was closed to me... but these guys drew out a really clear route map."

Lloyd can't yet confirm whether the scheme will run again, but says: "There are some great discussions going on." She told the budding writers in the audience: "Watch this space!"

Seraphina Allard-Bridge

Sound advice from Scotland

"It's fun but it's intense... flying by the seat of your pants a lot of the time."

Heather Andrews, a dubbing mixer and sound designer, who has worked on ITV crime drama *Karen Pirie*, was talking about working in sound at a ScreenSkills/RTS Scotland session this month.

Offering advice, Andrews

said: "Learn from the people doing it... If people think you're good and they really like you, they'll keep giving you work."

Andrews cautioned, however, that the work comes in peaks and troughs, which can leave you exposed in what is largely a freelance industry.

Sound mixer Graham McCormick (*Shetland*) worked

on short films for "little or no money", before landing his first sound trainee role on BBC Scotland drama *Tinsel Town*. He then found regular work as a boom operator.

Sound assistant Hayley Pollock (*The Weakest Link*) did a degree in sound, but broke into TV as a runner. "It meant that my face was in the building – I used to bring [fellow panellist] Jim [Hunter] his cups of tea," she recalled.

When BBC Scotland needed more sound people to cover an election, Pollock was given an opportunity; within a year and a half of starting in TV, she was working exclusively in sound. But running,

she added, was an ideal first job, giving her "a good foundation in how TV works".

Sound supervisor Jim Hunter, who won the RTS Scotland Outstanding Achievement Award on leaving the BBC last year, now freelances. He was optimistic about the future of sound. "AI does have a place in some parts of sound to assist people, but not to take over their jobs. There will still be [a need] for the craft skills... it's an exciting time."

The event was chaired by James Wilson, Curriculum Head: Broadcasting at City of Glasgow College.

Matthew Bell

From the moment I got the results... I had a lot of questions I didn't know what to do with. I thought... if I put it all into the structure of a film... then I could make sense of it... Films have always saved me." This was RTS Futures Award nominee Luke Davies, co-producer and subject of BBC Three's life-affirming documentary *Stranger in My Family*.

Those results were from Davies's DNA test. His journey to redefine his identity, uncovering two key, long-buried secrets that would turn his and his extended family's worlds upside-down, was documented over the next four years.

As an ordinary boy, growing up white in Rochdale, Davies expected the nagging feeling that he was different to go away, once he realised he was gay. It didn't.

It wasn't until a quip about box-ticking by his manager – "Tick working-class, tick gay," Davies says in the film, "and then she said: 'Tick mixed race'" – that the penny dropped.

To Davies's shock, the results showed he had Portuguese and west African DNA. So, based on Davies's mother's sketchy memories of her holiday romance in 1990s Portugal, he began an apparently impossible search, full of twists and turns, for his biological father – an Albufeira bartender called Carlos, surname unknown.

At a young directors' conference, Davies met Tamar Mankassarian, herself of mixed heritage – "Lebanese, Armenian, Canadian, a mish-mash". She told the capacity RTS audience: "We didn't know where [the film] was going... but we knew the sentiment we wanted, and that we wanted people to connect with Luke's story".

Enter documentary story consultant Nic Guttridge. "It



Stranger in My Family

BBC

DNA doc warms hearts

North West Carole Solazzo discovers how life-affirming BBC Three film *Stranger in My Family* was developed and made

was clear from the first chat that this could be a very interesting film," he said. "There was a very clear narrative journey, the stakes were high, the potential for emotion was built in."

He continued: "One of the big obstacles we had was... how do we make it something people will invest in... when the idea of finding Carlos was obviously ludicrous?"

Guttridge became more involved than expected. "My partner is mixed race, my son was one year old..." and he realised that, "as a father... I might not be able to guide my son... through life with my experiences, because... people of colour grow up being treated by the world in a different way to me."

"There are so many parents and children out there who will find something to identify with in this film."

Guttridge approached RTS Award-winning shooter-director Sunny Kang, who "leapt at the opportunity to mentor a new director [Mankassarian]".

Input from Guttridge and Kang helped Davies and Mankassarian win the BBC Three Northern Docs Pitch competition, and a commission from Fran Baker, the first BBC Documentaries commissioning editor to be based in the North.

"That universal question, 'Who am I?' is always going to be relevant to BBC Three," Baker said, "And [Davies's] story taps into that."

When co-executive producer Cat Lewis and her Manchester production company, Nine Lives Media, came aboard, Lewis encountered huge challenges.

"The bravest decision was after Christmas... to tell

Sunny: 'We're going to put the filming on hold,'" she recalled, "because [forensic genealogist] Dr Ângela Campos [working with genetic genealogist Laura House who filled in some of the blanks]... was confident that, given time, she could track down the right people."

Meanwhile, Davies and his family had benefited from the process itself: "There were fruitful conversations that we wouldn't have had, if we hadn't been filming."

Guttridge concluded: "This film has literally changed people's lives, and for the better." ■

The event was held at the Everyman Manchester on 9 September, hosted by Ben Hunte, Global Correspondent for Vice News, and produced by RTS North West in association with Beautiful Productions and Nine Lives Media.

Big, bold investigations. New talent. Noise and risk-taking. Stories that unite us. Head-turning shows with unprecedented access.

It's quite a shopping list, but it's a flavour of what broadcasters are looking for in factual programming, a panel of commissioners told an audience at an RTS East event in Cambridge last month.

Louisa Compton's investigations unit at Channel 4 needed no more introduction than a brief clip of her recent *Dispatches* film on Russell Brand, but she stressed that, as well as seeking high-level, impactful investigations, she is looking for subjects to get people talking, such as *Rebekah Vardy: Jehovah's Witnesses and Me*.

Her colleague Alisa Pomeroy at Channel 4 documentaries is on the lookout for bold stories, including those told "in granular detail which we watch like a drama", such as *Evacuation*, about the British leaving Afghanistan.

ITV's Jo Clinton-Davis said her brief is for "noisy",



Chiara Di Filippo

Channels offer factual pointers

connectable factual entertainment, including relatable franchises such as *Long Lost Family* that are ripe for spin-offs, shows that can sit comfortably at 9:00pm and those that appear to be telling one story but then reveal another. *Grand Slammers*, in which England's 2003 World

Cup-winning rugby team take on a team of prisoners, is a current example. It's about rugby, said Clinton-Davis, but also prison reform.

Carl Callam at the BBC is keen to find new precincts beyond the blue lights and advised the audience to consider what might be key

election issues. These stories should be "jaw dropping" and able to air across a multitude of BBC platforms.

Callam's regional commissioner colleague, Mark Harrison, seeks "state of the nation" pieces for BBC Two and Three, and is flexible on how they are told – talent-led, such as *Paul Whitehouse: Our Troubled Rivers* or formatted such as *Evicted*.

National Geographic wants "best-in-class" factuals with unprecedented access. "We're not open to the inauthentic but, other than that, anything goes," commissioning editor Simon Raikes said. It must be gripping and preferably open to franchises and further box set spin-offs. If it's host-led, then ensure the host has a mission or unique access, or is a specialist.

Daniel Pearl, who is about to leave Channel 5, advised keeping pitches simple. Simplicity is the hardest part of making TV, he said – get it right and you'll catch our attention.

True Vision Productions' Brian Woods chaired "Meet the factual commissioners". **Rachel Watson**

Hit RTÉ show still reeling in the years

The producer of *Reeling in the Years* offered an enthralling presentation on RTÉ One's hit show at a Republic of Ireland event in Dublin in September.

John O'Regan created *Reeling in the Years*, which first aired in 1999, and has subsequently produced the series.

The show – inspired by the BBC series *The Rock 'n' Roll Years*, which dates from the 1980s – mixes archive material with music and has

grown into something quite extraordinary, tugging at the public's heart strings in a unique way.

The key to the success of the series lies in its clever editing, and O'Regan gave a masterclass in this TV craft, offering an exceptional insight into the production process.

Each of the 58 episodes covers the national and international events of a single year, but O'Regan emphasised that he includes interesting,



RTÉ

small events as well as the major, headline-hitting happenings in the series.

These feature the ordinary and often anonymous

individuals who are the warp and weft of Ireland's social history, whether happy or sad, celebratory or grieving.

Agnes Cogan



RTS bursary scholars with James Corden

Richard Kendall

The UPSIDE

Cambridge win for culture secretary

For some delegates, last month's RTS Cambridge Convention was the first time they had attended the biennial gathering since before the pandemic.

The full Renaissance splendour of King's College Chapel was compromised by a raft of scaffolding – incredibly, solar panels are being installed on the roof – but Cambridge 2023 was bursting at the seams with stimulating sessions and opportunities to network.

And, despite storms, heavy traffic, and cancelled trains on the London line, Lucy Frazer, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, still managed to arrive at the Convention early to deliver her Cambridge keynote, unlike some of her (many) predecessors. Not only that, after her speech, she stayed for drinks, clearly delighted to be rubbing shoulders with the TV sector's top brass.

No wonder the culture

secretary has made such a positive impression with stakeholders.

King's welcome for TV scholars

The RTS bursary students were much in evidence at Cambridge. One student, Joey Houldsworth, was even working in the gallery for Creative Technology on the live stream as a video engineer. We wish him well as he prepares to join Sky.

All were thrilled to have their photograph taken with an obliging James Corden, affable and obviously thrilled to be back in the UK following eight years and 1,200 editions hosting *The Late Late Show*.

Ryan takes the chair at King's

Performing in the lofty King's College Hall packed full of TV executives must be a tough gig for even the most experienced entertainer – the Comedy Store it isn't.

Katherine Ryan, booked as the after-dinner speaker and looking resplendent in a sparkly dress, took it all in her stride.

After removing her

vertiginous heels to stand on a chair, the Canadian comedian surveyed the room, glancing at the many portraits of illustrious males that grace the walls. "Some of my exes," quipped the star of Netflix's *The Duchess*.

Ryan wasted no time in identifying one of the diners at the top table as a man who looked like he played a lot of golf. All part of the Cambridge Convention experience for Channel 4 Chair Ian Cheshire, who took it in good part.

As did another of her foils, the RTS's Honorary Secretary, erstwhile newsman Simon Bucks, quizzed by the comic on how long he had been married. Longer than the comedian, by quite a stretch.

And congratulations to Bucks, recently appointed to Ofcom's Content Board.

No consensus on TV news neutrality

It is invidious to single out one Convention session, but Piers Morgan and Krishnan Guru-Murthy set the conference buzzing as they traded verbal blows on whether news presenters should be impartial.

No prizes for guessing who was on which side of an

increasingly pertinent debate. The temperature in the room rose as neither man gave ground.

However, Morgan affectionately referred to the *Channel 4 News* anchor as "twinkle toes," a reference to Guru-Murthy as a *Strictly* contender, and, backstage, the two were seen gracefully holding one another in an impromptu dance routine, all filmed and posted on X (formerly known as Twitter).

Netflix brings Joy to college precinct

Finally, sharp-eyed Cambridge attendees would have noticed a film crew at work in the picturesque precinct of King's College.

Late-20th-century period costume was much in evidence. The crew was hard at work on *Joy*, a new Netflix movie starring Thomasin McKenzie as embryologist Jean Purdy, who battles the establishment to create the world's first IVF baby.

The cast also includes James Norton and Bill Nighy. What a shame all involved didn't drop in to share a drink at the rather swanky King's College bar. They would have bumped into some interesting company. ■



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