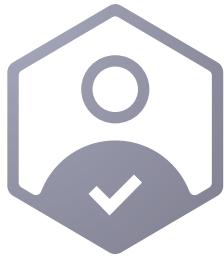


Television

**UKTV scans
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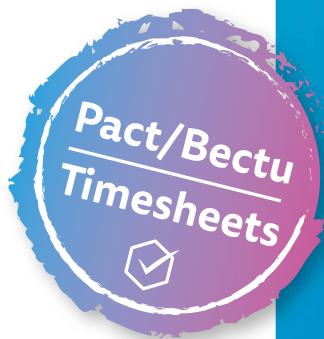
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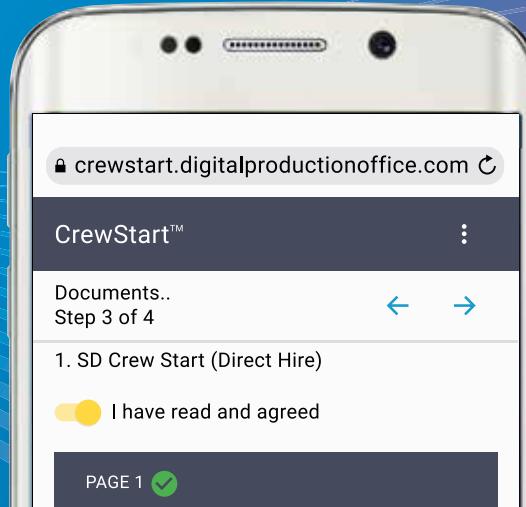
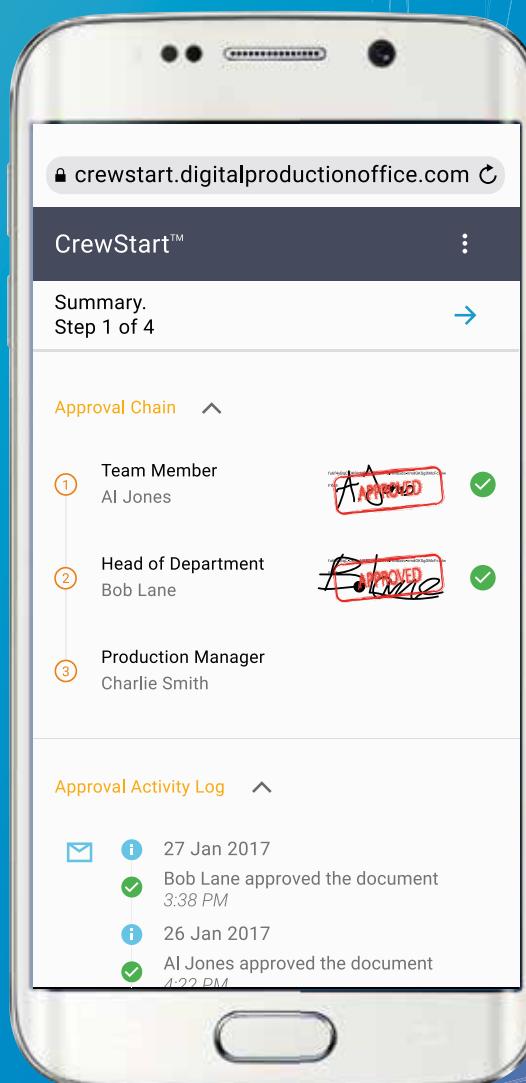
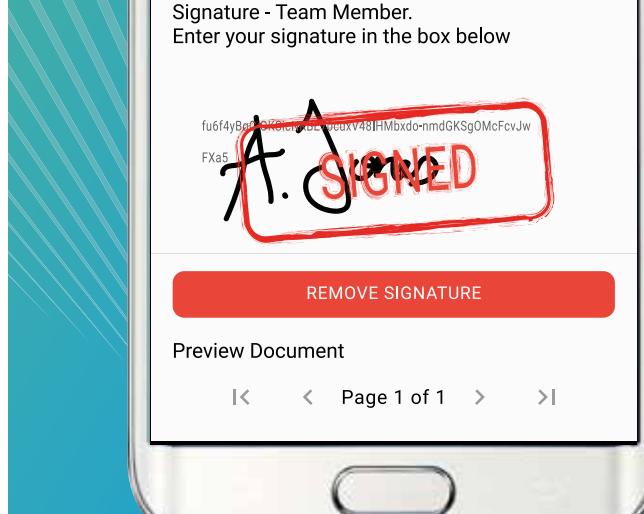
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From the CEO



The RTS's year is off to a racing start, with a full events calendar. At our head office, juries have been busy debating the nominees and winners of both the RTS Television Journalism Awards and the RTS Programme Awards.

Our events in London and beyond have been packed.

Channel 4's director of programmes, Ian Katz, braved a bad cold and a chilly January night to talk at length on a range of topics, and show clips from the broadcaster's exciting new schedule. There is a full report in this issue of *Television*. Huge thanks to Ian,

his interviewer, Kate Bulkley, and to the producer, Martin Stott.

The second season of *Sex Education* is, if anything, even funnier than the first. I, for one, am hooked. RTS Cymru Wales and Bafta Cymru collaborated – in what I hope will be the first of many similar partnerships – on a screening and Q&A with some of the show's production team. Catch Matthew Bell's report inside.

In Salford, RTS North West hosted a masterclass with the acclaimed US showrunner Frank Spotnitz, whose credits include *The X-Files*. The audience lapped up his insights into the US approach to TV storytelling.

Elsewhere, Roz Laws profiles RTS

award winner Guz Khan, who has enjoyed a meteoric rise, thanks to his BBC Three show *Man Like Mobeen* and his appearances on *Live at the Apollo*.

Our cover story is an interview with UKTV's CEO, Marcus Arthur. He explains his strategy, now that BBC Studios is the business's sole owner.

Also, don't miss Torin Douglas's analysis of what looks certain to be a very busy year for Ofcom and whoever is appointed to succeed Sharon White as the regulator's Chief Executive.

Theresa.

Theresa Wise

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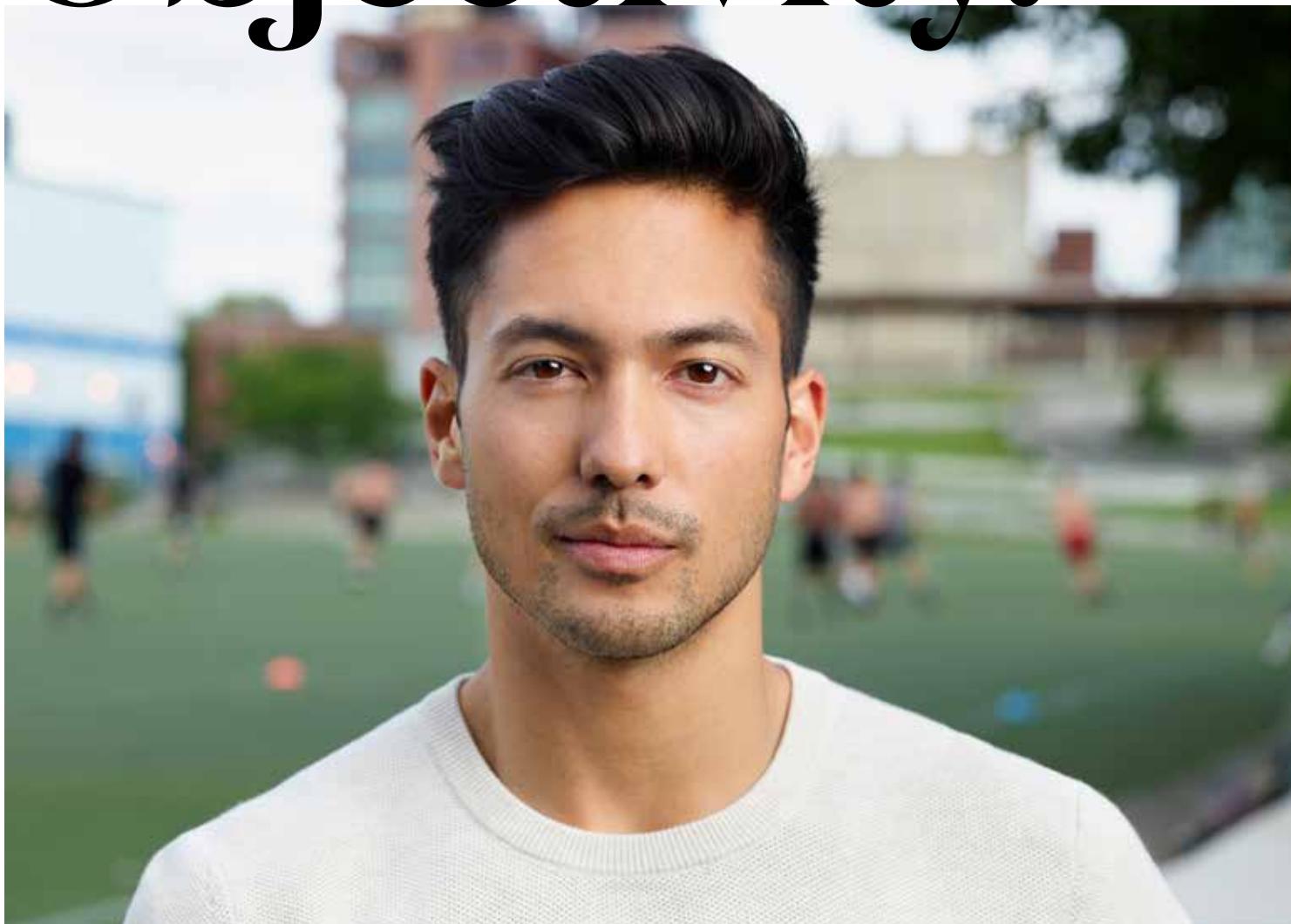
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Cover: *Traces* (UKTV)

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TV diary

Deborah Williams is reluctant to take off her PJs before she heads to Manchester for a surprising turn of events

It is always a pleasure to start the working week in your PJs and know that you can stay in them for most of the day, having meetings without anyone knowing or caring.

It is one of the rare weeks when I will spend the majority of it out of London. I am going to Manchester to attend an awards ceremony where I have been nominated for an Inclusive Companies award.

I am looking forward to it as the whole Brexit, leaving Europe thing and general election result has been getting on my nerves.

■ Working for the Creative Diversity Network means that you end up trawling through the worst of people's thinking and understanding (or lack thereof) of what diversity is, and how it's a positive in an increasingly negative world.

My travels around the UK tell me that there are real issues that need to be discussed – but these are less to do with the colour of our passports, and more with how we support diverse talent to finance the creation of quality content.

■ Anyway, the first PJ meeting is a conference call with our research partners at the University of Leicester. We are at the sign-off stage on a report identifying the barriers to disabled people working off-screen in TV, and what needs to be done about these. The findings are what CDN

members will be using to help the industry meet the target of doubling disability commitment by the end of 2020. No pressure there, then.

■ Meeting number two – still wearing PJs – is all about day-to-day CDN business, lining up projects for the first quarter of 2020. That done, it's off to Manchester.

■ Alongside the awards ceremony, I am booked into an academy school in Trafford for one of my regular "speakers for schools" sessions.

Basically, the likes of me travel across the country talking in schools to year 9s who want to know what it's like to work in TV. Telling the story of one's life to future generations is exhausting and exhilarating.

Each time I walk away, I'm inspired. It's great that young people want to work in television, that they do the research and ask difficult questions – and that they laugh at my terrible jokes.

Most of all, it's great that, after my sessions, they are not deterred.

■ I squeeze in a bit of personal time, and drop in on my nephew. He is a seven-year-old with the mind of a scholar. It is a short visit, but we play cards, using the deck he has designed. We discuss the world, via the globe in his bedroom, and he insists I taste the hot pepper sauce his dad has made. Ninety minutes well spent – despite his

ever-strengthening Manchester accent and love of the blues, not the reds.

■ And, finally, to the Inclusive Companies Awards. My expectations are low: the shortlist is massive and intimidating. I hook up with my youngest sister (the nephew's mother, in case you've not been taking notes).

Everyone is busy drinking fizz and taking pictures – this introvert's idea of hell. Anyway, turns out, it's a good thing I made the journey: I win the Lifetime Achiever Award 2019. To say that I am in shock really is an understatement. I can't share with you the first words that come out of my mouth – much too dirty.

Once I calm down and take it in on the way home the next day, I finally allow myself to feel OK about winning. I manage to take some of my own advice: do what you do, always, because you never know who is watching.

■ Friday: finance day, reviewing end-of-year accounts and the monthly paying of invoices.

I jump back into online conversations, drawing up strategies and responding without sounding too pompous and self-righteous.

Which is really difficult when you're always right.

Deborah Williams is CEO of the Creative Diversity Network.

Ear candy



From left: Kem Cetinay
and Arielle Free

Love Island: The Morning After

ITV

Can't stop talking about the first winter *Love Island*? Neither can **Kem Cetinay** and **Arielle Free**, the hosts of the show's podcast. Kate Holman clicks play

Close the curtains, turn up the heating and settle on the sofa. *Love Island* is back with its first-ever winter edition, along with a new location and a new host.

If you haven't got your fix from the daily episode, the *Love Island: The Morning After* podcast returns for a third series as the much-needed pick-me-up after the drama of the night before.

Hosted by 2017 *Love Island* winner Kem Cetinay and Radio 1 presenter

Arielle Free, ITV's official *Love Island* podcast covers everything from romances and bromances to showmances – and everything in between.

With heads spinning, hearts breaking and arguments starting, Kem and Arielle are on hand to dissect all the latest happenings from the previous episode condensed into a half-hour of gossip that's perfect for your morning commute.

The podcast also welcomes a host of special guests and celebrity fans of the show, including Radio 1 DJ Scott Mills, ex-Islander Curtis Pritchard and new host Laura Whitmore.

Kem and Arielle's effortless chemistry and love of the show feels like a hilarious catch-up with friends.

Arielle reveals her personal theories and predictions about the future romances and break-ups of the current series.

Kem provides the essential decoding of the *Love Island* lingo, while sharing his personal experiences and insider secrets of villa life.

If you dared to have a social life in January and missed an episode of *Love Island*, *The Morning After* podcast will prepare you for that water-cooler moment at work. ■



Dad's Army: The Lost Episodes
(shot at Pinewood last year for UKTV channel Gold)

Ollie Upton, ©UKTV 2019

Studio manager

Naomi Dulake has been at Pinewood Studios for six years, working on some of the UK's biggest shows, including UKTV celebrity gameshow *Taskmaster* and Lee Mack's BBC One sitcom *Not Going Out*.

What does the job involve?

When we get a production confirmed at Pinewood TV, I latch myself on to it two or three months before it comes into the studio. I book all the kit and the crew; oversee the building of the set; and book the recording days and the strike days, when the set is dismantled. If the show has an audience, I have to get them on and off site, too.

Do you work long days?

On recording days, I can work up to 14 hours. Two episodes of *Taskmaster* – each with an audience of 300 – are shot back to back in a day. A show takes two and a half hours to record, with only a 20-minute turnaround – when we get one audience out and the next in – between the first and second show.

Taskmaster has a massive following and we always try to find a way to accommodate its fans for the

recording. They're usually a happy bunch. I look after the talent, too, and any issues they have with dressing rooms, hair, make-up and wardrobe.

Do other shows shoot differently?

Sitcoms such as *Not Going Out* rehearse on set and we have them at the studios for much longer – usually six weeks or so. Each week, we do rehearsals, a technical run-through, a pre-record and then a recording in front of a live audience. We turn the sets around and then start work on the next episode the following week.

At the other end of the scale, we shoot three, sometimes four episodes of Warwick Davis's ITV quiz *Tenable* in a single day at Pinewood.

Has the job changed over the years?

Programme budgets have fallen over time, but productions still expect the same service.

What does Pinewood offer shows?

Three TV studios and a small but experienced team – returning productions see the same faces, people who really know their shows. Having said that, it takes a huge number of people to actually shoot a show. On a recording day, we can have anything

from 30 to 70 people working on the studio floor, plus another 20 in the gallery, and the talent.

How do I become a studio manager?

It's great to start as a runner because you meet everyone on the team and learn about their roles. Personally, I started as a co-ordinator for an outside broadcast company, before moving to Pinewood.

What qualities do you need to have?

You've got to be calm, collected and organised, especially with scheduling. And be approachable – productions will want to talk to you in confidence.

What are the best and worst aspects?

I love the fast pace and solving problems, and you get to see what you've worked on very quickly on TV. The worst? Your job can become your life at times. While I'm working on one production, I'm also preparing for the next shows to move in. I can be busy on anything up to six productions at one time – but everyone thinks they have my time exclusively. ■

Pinewood Studios' senior TV studio manager Naomi Dulake was interviewed by Matthew Bell.



Dad's Army: The Lost Episodes

UKTV

UKTV looks beyond the UK

CEO **Marcus Arthur** aims to grow the company internationally now that it is fully owned by BBC Studios. Steve Clarke reports

Marcus Arthur may be a BBC veteran, but the winds of change blowing through UKTV these past nine months or so have been like no other in his lengthy BBC career.

Last June, he succeeded Darren Childs as the outfit's CEO. His appointment followed the end of the joint venture with Discovery, which finally gave BBC Studios full control of UKTV and its seven-channel portfolio (its three lifestyle channels were acquired by Discovery as part of the separation) and the online hub, UKTV Play.

The line-up comprises pay-channels Gold, W, Alibi and Eden, plus free-to-air services Dave, Drama and Yesterday.

UKTV – formed originally as a partnership between BBC Worldwide and Thames Television – has consistently punched above its weight against US-backed competitors. This is thanks to its exclusive, first-look deal with the BBC, which gives it secondary linear-TV and catch-up rights to everything from *Line of Duty* and *Top Gear* to, last but hardly least, *Dad's Army*. Throw in all of *Gavin & Stacey* and *Fawlty Towers* and it's not hard to see why UKTV has been so resilient for so long.

Childs' regime saw the group move

confidently into commissioning original shows, latterly scoring with *Dad's Army: The Lost Episodes*, the glossy PR drama *Flack* and, of course, *Taskmaster*.

Now, UKTV has reached what Arthur recently described as "a watershed moment" and he is weighing up the next phase of its development.

Arthur was born and bred in Glasgow, one of six brothers and sisters. His father was a firefighter, his mother a secretary. He read psychology at the University of Glasgow, followed by an MBA.

His first job was selling advertising for BBC Magazines. A defining time was working at *Radio Times*, where he was publishing director for four years.

'STRONG CHANNEL BRANDS AND STRONG CHANNELS: THAT'S THE WAY WE MARKET AND SELL'

Next year, he will celebrate 30 years at the Beeb.

Prior to taking over the top job at UKTV, he ran BBC Studios' UK region, a job that involved running 10 businesses ranging across magazines, DVDs, live events, audio and clips. He was also responsible for Studios' Australian business, which includes six pay-TV channels – all "hugely profitable", he notes.

It was here that he gained the experience that qualified him to run UKTV, whose board he has been on for six years. "I knew the business reasonably well from the outside before I came in," says Arthur with a degree of self-effacement.

On Childs' watch, a period spanning eight years, revenues at UKTV grew by 68%, while the portfolio's share of commercial viewing increased by 42%.

The new CEO is under no illusions that he can repeat this: today's market is considerably more competitive. "Over that period, UKTV's content costs doubled. The ambition to grow channels and launch new things was fully invested in by both of the shareholders," he recalls. "That was an opportunity for massive growth. There is less obvious opportunity now, but there will be stuff there."

Before the split from Discovery, he says the company was "almost land-locked" in its ability to make decisions. "It was a UK-only business and that's how it looked at its future, bought its rights and bought its content slate," he explains. "UKTV almost completes the set for BBC Studios, because it has production, content distribution and origination and relationships with indies – but what it never had was a large channel portfolio outside the BBC that it could run its content through."

Arthur, a convivial man who seems to burst with energy, stresses that, in its latest iteration, UKTV can commission shows that can make a splash in international markets and even launch some of its channels and brands outside of the UK.

He cites the example of crime thriller *Traces*, the acclaimed drama commissioned for Alibi, starring Martin



Marcus Arthur

The broadcaster reported a 7.76% share of commercial impacts in 2019, up from the previous year's 7.48%. His ambition is to get this up to 9%. "If we achieved that, we'd be the second biggest channels group again. There are people who are bigger than us, but we can compete with them because we've got great content," says Arthur.

UKTV commissions accounted for seven of its top-10 performers in 2019, including Gold's *The Cockfields* and *Dad's Army: The Lost Episodes*, Dave's *Taskmaster*, W's *Emma Willis: Delivering Babies* and Alibi's *Traces*. Dave helped grow the portfolio's share of 16- to 34-year-olds by 14% (up from a 5% to a 5.76% share of audience). UKTV claims that Dave is the number-one non-PSB channel for this demographic.

If this sounds like it has all been plain sailing with Arthur at the helm, think again. In November, Channel 4 announced that it had snapped up the company's most successful original show, *Taskmaster*.

Reports suggested that staff at UKTV were "heartbroken" by the loss of the flagship series. Arthur puts it like this: "At some point, all your children leave home. We put blood, sweat and tears into that programme. Originally, they went to Channel 4 with it. It didn't work with them, so they came to us.

"We put that show on the map and invested huge amounts of marketing money to grow it. It got to the place where the renegotiation was such that we couldn't hold on to it."

Typically upbeat, Arthur highlights the opportunity to invest in new shows now that the budget for *Taskmaster* is freed up.

The priorities are drama, comedy and factual entertainment. Also likely are more partnerships between UKTV and the BBC's main channels of the kind that saw *Expedition with Steve Backshall* launch as a four-episode BBC Two series before a further six parts broadcast on Dave.

And don't be surprised if the present seven-channel line-up starts to grow again. Arthur hints: "We haven't got a definitive plan, but we will be looking at every opportunity." ■



IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

This was always going to be a big year for Ofcom. Its to-do list for 2020 includes: overhauling the telecoms market and upgrading the UK's broadband network; a major review of public service broadcasting and its future in the face of changing technology and audience habits and huge global competition; tackling both "online harm" and industry diversity issues; updating EU "audio-visual services" rules post Brexit; and, as the BBC's regulator, trying to sharpen the corporation's performance and decision-making.

But the stakes have been raised, for a body that cherishes its reputation as an independent regulator, by a newly powerful Government with strong views and ambitions in the media and telecoms sphere. The delay in

PSB

Torin Douglas outlines the challenges facing the regulator in the months ahead

appointing Ofcom's new Chief Executive and the recently opened search for the next BBC Director-General have highlighted the sensitive, sometimes fraught, relationship between regulators, broadcasters and government.

Warning signs emerged during the general election, when Prime Minister Boris Johnson questioned the BBC's licence-fee funding, accused its news programmes of anti-Brexit bias and

told his ministers not to appear on Radio 4's *Today* programme.

He also crossed swords with Channel 4 after it empty-chaired him (with a melting block of ice) during its climate-change election debate.

The Conservatives complained to Ofcom that the block of ice breached Channel 4's impartiality obligations. Ofcom's Election Committee rejected the complaint, but the incident showed that the UK's communications regulator cannot avoid politics.

And that's just one of the potential problems for Ofcom. During the election campaign, Johnson made an ambitious pledge to connect all UK homes to "gigabit-speed" broadband by 2025 – a task Ofcom is now striving to fulfil.

On 8 January, it announced a new five-year telecoms plan aimed at encouraging BT and other telcos to

invest more heavily in fibre. But the regulator still had no Chief Executive, even though the favoured candidate to succeed Sharon White was named in *The Guardian* last November.

"Ofcom has chosen Melanie Dawes, one of the UK's most senior civil servants, to be its new Chief Executive," it wrote. "The 53-year-old, the most senior woman in the civil service, is currently permanent secretary at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government..."

The newspaper added that the announcement was not likely to be confirmed until after the election – and that this might have an impact on her appointment, which had to be agreed by the culture secretary.

And so it transpired. When the scale of the election victory became clear, Johnson's team floated the idea of a radical shake-up of Whitehall, under which the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) might lose oversight of digital and telecommunications policy or be disbanded altogether.

Culture secretary Nicky Morgan, who had stood down as an MP, was given a peerage and stayed on, ahead of a planned February reshuffle. No Ofcom appointment was announced.

On 19 January, an explanation emerged in a *Sunday Telegraph* headline: "Revolution in Whitehall hits search for Ofcom chief". The paper reported: "In the latest sign of the determination in No 10 to shake up officialdom and the BBC, the Government has refused to approve the regulator's preferred candidate and launched a search for leaders beyond Whitehall. Culture secretary Baroness Morgan has been making personal approaches to industry executives to encourage them to apply for the role."

The *Sunday Telegraph* explained the significance of the change: "The regulator is at the centre of attempts to overhaul the telecoms market to deliver a nationwide broadband upgrade within five years. Meeting the ambitious goal was one of the Prime Minister's main campaign pledges.

"Ofcom is also responsible for regulation of the BBC and due to conduct a

'SOME IN GOVERNMENT VIEW [OFCOM] AS A VEHICLE TO FORCE CHANGE ON THE NATIONAL BROADCASTER'

review of the public service broadcasting system, which some in government view as a vehicle to force change on the national broadcaster."

The following morning, the BBC announced that Tony Hall would step down as Director-General in the summer.

Colin Browne, Chair of Voice of the Listener and Viewer, which works to promote high-quality broadcasting, says: "Reports that the Government has turned down Ofcom's candidate for CEO don't augur well for its relationship with the Government.

"It's just another piece in what looks like an uncertain and potentially hazardous period for PSB, which has been further complicated by the upcoming retirement of Tony Hall."

He adds: "We know the Government has made unfriendly comments about the BBC and Channel 4 and it remains to be seen how far Ofcom is affected by that. Ofcom has always tried to avoid the politics but you can't protect PSB by regulation alone, you need government legislation."

But let's put aside the politics. What are Ofcom's key tasks for 2020,

'YOU CAN'T PROTECT PSB BY REGULATION ALONE, YOU NEED GOVERNMENT LEGISLATION'

under its acting Chief Executive, Jonathan Oxley?

The race to meet the 2025 target for faster and more reliable broadband is of crucial importance, to broadcasters, as much as anyone, as their audiences move online.

But a bigger priority for the television world – particularly the BBC, Channel 4 and ITV – is Ofcom's PSB review, aimed at preserving the benefits of public service broadcasting in the face of changing technology, viewing behaviour and unprecedented global competition. The first stage is about to be published: its assessment of the current state of PSB, and how it performed from 2014 to 2018. Now, Ofcom is looking to the future and what it calls the fundamental question: how to ensure a mix of high-quality, original UK content in an on-demand and increasingly personalised environment.

Under the title Small Screen: Big Debate, it has launched a nationwide series of discussions with broadcasters, producers and representative groups, as well as examining the views of audiences via focus groups.

Sir Peter Bazalgette, Chair of ITV and former Chair of the Arts Council, led an independent review of the UK's creative industries. He says the future of the UK's PSB is crucial to its democracy, culture and economy: "Are we going to have trustworthy news? Are we going to have British-made programmes for Brits about Brits? The regulator needs to ensure there is protection for the content and distribution that underpins our democracy."

The crucial issue here, say ITV and the BBC, is "prominence" – making sure that audiences can easily find public service content in a world of smart TVs, tablets and online streaming, where programmes are discovered via apps, rather than EPGs that prioritise the public service channels.

Clare Sumner, the BBC's policy director, recently told the Westminster Media Forum: "We need a flexible framework of regulation that enables PSBs to thrive in the face of unprecedented global competition, where UK content and trusted news are not the priority for ➤



BBC Chair Sir David Clementi

BBC

many others. This means future-proof legislation that gives Ofcom the flexibility to update its rules in real time, because the pace of change is incredible and it's only going to get quicker."

Magnus Brooke, ITV's director of policy and regulatory affairs, says that, unless the regulator and the Government take a tough line on the prominence rules, global companies may simply decide to do without the UK's PSB content. "We need a fair balance between the PSBs and the platforms, to ensure what we might call 'inclusion' – that national content is protected."

Sky has a different view. It sees the PSB review as a chance to challenge the orthodoxy espoused by ITV and the BBC, by opening up local news to new competition.

At the Westminster forum, Sky's policy director, David Wheeldon, said the PSB landscape should shift, to better reflect today's media landscape: "I urge Ofcom to be bold in its thinking and not be afraid to challenge the long-held assumptions about 'how things are done'."

Sky has also intervened on the issue of "online harm", with an article

last month in *The Times* by its group CEO, Jeremy Darroch, with a headline online of "What Prohibition teaches us about regulating the internet".

Sky is backing a bill by Lord McNally, which, Darroch wrote, would "kick off the long-overdue process by empowering Ofcom to prepare a duty-of-care obligation for online platforms, overseen by an independent and evidenced-based regulator".

And then there's Ofcom's relatively new role as regulator of the BBC, where both sides have been flexing their muscles. A year ago, BBC Chair Sir David Clementi told the Oxford Media Convention that the need to seek Ofcom approval for iPlayer updates was holding the corporation back.

"Every month is precious," he said. "Netflix, for example, currently updates its app more than 50 times a year – around once a week – with no hold-up, and no need for regulatory approval."

"[Our] regulatory system has its origins in an era when the BBC was seen as the big beast in the jungle, against whom all others needed protection. That view of the world has now passed. Increasingly, our major competitors are well funded,

international giants – Netflix, Spotify, Facebook, YouTube – whose financial resources dwarf our own."

Last autumn, Ofcom accused the BBC of a lack of transparency, after the Director-General overturned a ruling by its Executive Complaints Unit over remarks about Donald Trump made by *BBC Breakfast* presenter Naga Munchetty.

Kevin Bakhurst, Ofcom's director for content and media policy, said: "We have serious concerns around the transparency of the BBC's complaints process, which must command the confidence of the public. We'll be requiring the BBC to be more transparent about its processes and compliance findings as a matter of urgency."

The Guardian reported that the BBC had tried to stop Ofcom's inquiry. It alleged that David Jordan, the corporation's director of editorial policy and standards, had argued strongly that Ofcom lacked the authority to examine the case. A BBC spokesperson said: "We note Ofcom's finding and the fact that it agrees with the Director-General's decision."

Ofcom's next Chief Executive will not have a quiet life, whoever eventually gets the job. ■

OUR FRIEND IN LEEDS

When George Osborne first uttered the phrase “Northern Powerhouse” back in 2014, it’s fair to say that the TV industry wasn’t at the front of his mind. But, six years on, is it time to start thinking of it as such?

Back then, the mood in the TV industry across the North of England was very different. Both Leeds and Manchester were still struggling with the impact of ITV’s retrenchment to London, while the BBC’s project as the anchor tenant of MediaCity UK was barely into its stride.

In the indie community, there was an ongoing struggle for commissions – with only a handful of companies showing any signs of growth.

Jump forward to today and it’s a different story, with cautious optimism that the TV industry’s own version of the Northern Powerhouse is emerging. In 2020, the key players all have a stake somewhere along the M62.

After a decade of taking root, MediaCity UK is the world-class, digitally focused hub it set out to be. The BBC’s flagship presence is now joined by ITV (with *Corrie* at its heart, obviously), and myriad other studio and post-production facilities.

Across the Pennines, in Leeds, that is balanced by Channel 4, with its new national headquarters building due to open at the end of this year, and also by Sky (the owner of my own company, True North), which employs 650 people in its future-facing Digital and Technology Services Campus at Leeds Dock.

For the first time in nearly 20 years, the indie sector is growing. In

Andrew Sheldon
considers whether
TV production in the
North of England
is finally reaching
powerhouse scale



positive shift in approach from further education. The sector is introducing a degree of real-world practicality through initiatives such as Connected Campus, which brings all the Yorkshire universities together to focus on meeting the needs of the industry.

Despite some cynicism, Channel 4’s relocation has undoubtedly been key. There have been challenges – and there are probably more still to come – but, overall, it has had a clear galvanising effect.

The broadcaster now has a team of commissioners in place who are invested in the project. Armed with the new out-of-London quotas, they have the potential to create a huge impact. And not just in Leeds, but across the North, by encouraging production in the likes of Liverpool, Sheffield, Hull and Newcastle.

Channel 5 has long recognised the value that regional producers offer, and green-lit projects accordingly – many of them in the North West and Yorkshire. ITV has made a long-term commitment with its soaps and shows including *The Voice*.

No less welcome, the BBC is stepping outside of Salford with a new digital hub in Newcastle, coupled with its promise to move two-thirds of its employees outside London by 2027. Put together, it all suggests that “out of London” is finally being taken seriously.

I have no idea whether George Osborne’s broader vision of a Northern Powerhouse will ever be realised, but, for the first time in this century, there is a good chance that the TV industry will be able to deliver its own evocation. If only someone could sort out those bloody trains... ■

Manchester, established companies such as Blakeway North, Nine Lives and Workerbee have been joined by Studio Lambert and Gobstopper.

In Leeds, True North and Rollem now share the city with Wise Owl, Air TV, True Vision North and Duck Soup. The Garden has opened an office, and Daisybeck, the maker of Channel 5’s *Yorkshire Vet* franchise, has received an investment from Entertainment One, a clear indicator of confidence in northern production.

After years of wondering whether building a career outside London was even possible, there is a lift across both scripted and non-scripted, and a tangible shift in attitude as the number of vacancies across the production sector rises.

It’s being met in part by people relocating, but there has also been a

Andrew Sheldon is creative director and founder of True North.

Profile

Guz Khan, star and co-writer of *Man Like Mobeen*, is hot property. Roz Laws describes his rapid rise from school teacher to multiple RTS award winner

When he's not in the jungle penning quips for Ant and Dec, Andy Milligan is the co-writer of *Man Like Mobeen* and has a running joke with the sitcom's creator and star, Guz Khan. As they work on the hit BBC Three series together, Milligan asks him, "Can you tell me what every Muslim in Britain will think of this joke?"

This is because Khan has been dubbed "the face of British Muslims" – a result, Milligan points out, of it being far more likely for a bearded, practising Muslim to appear on our screens as a suicide bomber than as a character like Mobeen.

Khan has a wry laugh at the label and declares: "That is a crown I do not want to wear. It's tricky, as realistic depictions of Muslims on TV are still so few and far between. If there were another five shows like *Man Like Mobeen*, it would take the pressure off. And I do feel the pressure of trying to represent people as fairly as possible.

"I hope my community is proud that they have a voice that's honest. I'm sure that there are doctors and lawyers in Small Heath [the Birmingham suburb where *Man Like Mobeen* is set] saying, 'This is not our story! – but they can tell their own.'"

The third series of *Man Like Mobeen* recently dropped on BBC iPlayer. Set and filmed in inner-city Birmingham, the comedy follows Mobeen Deen, a young man with a dark past as a drug dealer who is trying to set a better example for his much younger sister in the absence of their parents.



Guz Khan in
*Man Like
Mobeen*

The real deal role model

Khan's depiction of "the ends" is based on his own experience growing up on a council estate in Coventry with a single mum. Pakistani immigrant Zainab Khan raised him and his two sisters following his father's death when he was three.

It's been a swift rise to prominence for 34-year-old Ghulam Khan, a married father of four. Five years ago, he was teaching humanities in Coventry and making comedy sketches for YouTube. One went viral after he joked that the film *Jurassic World* should be banned for racism because it called a species of dinosaur "pachys".

His Mobeen character subsequently appeared on iPlayer in the short *Roadman Ramadan*, as part of the *Comedy Feeds* series. His comic guide to the Islamic month of fasting became one of the platform's most-watched shows.

Events moved quickly. He gave up his teaching job and secured a pilot for *Man Like Mobeen*, also landing a breakfast radio show on BBC Asian Network and a part alongside Emma Bunton in Comedy Central's *Drunk History*. He was later to star alongside all the reunited Spice Girls in a Walkers' crisps advert.

In August 2017, it was announced that *Man Like Mobeen* was going to a full series. Executive producer Ben Cavey from Tiger Aspect – the show's co-producer – described Khan as "one of the most exciting new talents in the country".

The judges at the 2018 RTS Midlands Awards agreed, naming him the Outstanding New Talent. He has also scooped the Actor and (with Milligan) Writer prizes for the past two years.

On paper, you wouldn't expect the Khan and Milligan partnership to work as well as it does. The latter – Ant and Dec's only full-time writer for the past 14 years – admits he's from "quite a posh part" of Newcastle and doesn't get all the jokes in *Mobeen*. He was brought in as a script editor on *Comedy Feeds* and hit it off with Khan.

"We don't have much in common," says Milligan. "We bonded over our shared interest in hip hop and comedians such as Eddie Murphy."

"There's lots I don't understand, from Punjabi and Urdu words to cultural references. When we did a pre-view screening in Birmingham, the

'I WANT TO SEE MORE WORKING-CLASS PEOPLE IN FRONT OF AND BEHIND THE CAMERA'

audience laughed at things I didn't even realise were jokes.

"We hang episodes around issues such as knife crime, racial profiling and the NHS and, in the third series, we set one episode in a food bank. But the important thing is to make it funny, not worthy.

"Working with Guz isn't so different from Ant and Dec. All three are very nice people who make me laugh.

"Guz is very generous with his time on set and knows everyone's names. We all know self-centred performers, but Guz couldn't be further from that.

"Any bad points? He's always late and never answers his phone, which is annoying. But that's about the worst thing I can think of."

One of Khan's passions is helping others to break into TV. For series 3 of *Man Like Mobeen*, he launched a training scheme in partnership with Film Birmingham, BBC Comedy and Tiger Aspect to offer eight paid, entry-level positions in production for people from the West Midlands.

Khan says: "Most people have no idea how to access the entertainment industry – where do you start? So it's important for us to offer opportunities. I want to see more working-class people in front of and behind the camera. Talking is all well and good but you need to walk the walk.

"The scheme didn't cost us too

'HE'S ALWAYS LATE AND NEVER ANSWERS HIS PHONE, WHICH IS ANNOYING'

much money or time and I hope it helped these youngsters see they could have a future in the industry."

Khan has also shown his former pupils at Grace Academy what they could achieve. "I still see them all the time, on the street and in the supermarket. I think I've become more of a crazy uncle to them. A few of them are interested in acting and have started their own YouTube channels, which fills me with joy."

Wolverhampton actor Dúaa Karim was just 15 when she won the role of Mobeen's sister, Aqsa. "He's just like my big brother, in real life as well as on screen," she says of Khan. "He's very kind and encouraging of young talent."

With Khan's dedication to honesty, in retrospect it seems obvious that, when he appeared on a recent episode of the BBC One panel show *Would I Lie To You?*, his two hilarious stories – concerning locking a fellow teacher in a cupboard and paying a friend to share his hotel room to scare away ghosts – had to be true.

He says: "That was great fun. The offers are coming in to appear on other panel shows but if I feel the vibe isn't right, I give it a miss. I don't have to be everywhere."

Khan did say yes to playing Idris Elba's friend Del in Netflix's *Turn Up Charlie* and spent several weeks in a camper van with Billy Zane for Sky One's *Curfew*. Additionally, he was cast by Mindy Kaling in her TV remake of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*.

For Khan's next project he's going back to school, but not to teach. He's created a new sitcom that he hopes to star in based on his classroom career.

He ponders: "I've got to know Romesh Ranganathan well, as another teacher turned comedian. He said that no one else has come through as quickly as me."

"I'd asked the school to hold my position because I'd be back in a year after having a bit of fun with comedy. But I never came close to going back, because it just kept building."

"I think it's because people gravitate towards someone they recognise. I'm one of their own and not fake. I'm not some Rada-trained actor, I've stumbled into this. But it seems to be going OK." ■



Crazy Delicious

Katz shares his recipe

Channel 4's director of programmes, **Ian Katz**, tells the RTS how he seeks to put clear blue water between the broadcaster and the SVoD giants

Ike every broadcaster, Channel 4 is feeling the heat from the streaming giants. But, at an RTS early-evening event, the network's director of programmes stated that, despite their bigger budgets, he can offer producers the personal touch that Netflix et al lack.

Ian Katz said: "If you ask drama producers what is it like dealing with the streamers, they tend to say two things. On the plus side, you get quick answers and big budgets; on the negative side, they swallow up all your rights and you have a five-minute window....

"We can't compete on money and

we have to be quicker.... What we can compete on is TLC and impact. You get our bespoke attention from development through to marketing. We desperately want a show to land.

"What I'm finding, particularly with writers, is that the appeal of these, weighed against the money and the other things the SVoD world can offer, is growing."

Katz added that UK writers were showing their frustration with the streaming world: "There is a sense that you can toil away for years and drop something into the SVoD pond and it just disappears. It's much better to work with a PSB."

As evidence, he highlighted a new

E4 comedy, *Maxxx*, written and starring actor OT Fagbenle, who appeared in *The Handmaid's Tale*. "OT has never written a comedy before. It's been a labour of love over two or three years. Those are the kind of soft things that we can deliver that those with more money than us are not that interested in."

Judged by a clip from *Maxxx* that had the audience laughing noisily, the story about a former boy band star who becomes a drug-raddled, tabloid laughing stock, could take its place alongside other Channel 4 comic gems such as *Catastrophe*, *Peep Show* and *Father Ted*.

It's been two years since Katz succeeded Jay Hunt at Channel 4. By all accounts, the experience has been

something of a baptism of fire for the former *Guardian* deputy editor, whose only other job in TV was editing BBC Two's current affairs flagship, *Newsnight*, between 2013 and 2017.

The last six months have seen things settle down for Katz at the network, as viewing figures have improved and critics and audiences alike have started to applaud elements of his schedule. There's even been an Oscar nomination, for the Channel 4 Syrian war documentary *For Sama*.

He acknowledged that 2019 had been a year of "two halves" in terms of ratings. A tough beginning was followed by a much improved second half.

"We finished the year in a very strong place," said Katz, pointing out that Channel 4's audience share was "level across the demographics". "In peak, we were the only commercial broadcaster that was up for all demographics," he claimed. "Crucially for us, we were significantly up on BAME audiences, which was a big objective."

When he was appointed at the end of 2017, Katz said his aim at Channel 4 was to "make waves". In 2019, he had succeeded in creating "a lot of waves" as he identified shows such as: the prescient James Graham drama *Brexit: The Uncivil War* (his first commission starred Benedict Cumberbatch as Dominic Cummings); the second series of *Derry Girls*; and the Michael Jackson documentary *Leaving Neverland*.

For a taste of 2020, Katz played a video showcasing *Crazy Delicious*, a food-based competition that includes an edible set; *The Write Offs*, a series about adult literacy presented by Sandi Toksvig; and a new documentary, *Unexplained*, which examines the still controversial death of Stuart Lubbock, who was found dead in the swimming pool at Michael Barrymore's house.

"This film lays bare a really profound institutional failure to deliver justice," said Katz. "It's jaw dropping that, after 20 years, no one has been brought to account for this death."

"It also tells the extraordinary story of what a catastrophe like this does to a family.... But what takes it to another level and makes it quintessential Channel 4 is its extraordinary window on the way the media, celebrity and the public intersect."

Katz's first two years at the



Ian Katz

than the £5m-plus that might be spent by the SVoDs.

Turning to comedy, the director of programmes admitted that the genre struggled to match drama for ratings but argued that it often overperformed on All 4. "We have a fabulous tradition in comedy and there is a definitional quality about it," said Katz, who injected £10m into comedy in 2018. "If you can get comedy right, it has an incredibly long life. Week in and out, our biggest shows on All 4 are comedies such as *Friday Night Dinner* and *Derry Girls*."

He singled out *Stath Lets Flats* and *This Way Up* for praise and said he would continue to seek out significant content that would sit in the archive and generate views. "It is worth throwing out more fishing lines as every now and then you get a *Derry Girls*," he declared.

Channel 4's controversial decision to "empty chair" Boris Johnson with a melting ice block during a general election leaders' debate staged by Channel 4 News was arguably one of the defining media moments of the recent election.

It provoked outrage in the Conservative Party and a complaint to Ofcom that the broadcaster had infringed due impartiality rules, which was rejected.

Katz said that, as a journalist he had spent many years attempting to get climate change "into the heart of the political and the media agenda and mostly failing". But, overnight, Channel 4's debate put the spotlight on the subject. "I'm very proud of that. It was an extraordinary achievement."

He described *Channel 4 News* as "probably the highest-quality news programme in the world".

He added: "Ofcom has consistently given *Channel 4 News* a clean bill of health in terms of its impartiality. I concentrate on the news we make, and I think it's first rate."

"One of the most heartening things for me last year was that our news audiences were up substantially, both in volume and in share and across all demographics. I think that speaks for itself." ■

Report by Steve Clarke. 'In Conversation with Ian Katz' was held at H Club London on 21 January. Ian Katz was interviewed by journalist and media commentator Kate Bulkley. The producer was Martin Stott.

Sex for all ages

An RTS panel reveals how the explicit scenes required for *Sex Education* were filmed only once the cast was comfortable



Gillian Anderson in *Sex Education*

Netflix

Few series by the streamers have made as much noise as Netflix's *Sex Education*, which brings the genre of the US high-school teen drama to the UK – and adds plenty of gauche sex.

The global giant released the second season of the comedy-drama in January. A few days earlier, the first episode was premiered at a joint RTS Cymru Wales/Bafta Cymru event in Cardiff.

Jaws dropped around the cinema during what we can safely say – even this early in the year – will be 2020's most astonishing opening sequence. Otis Milburn (Asa Butterfield) is shown trying and failing to control his newly discovered sexual urges in a scene that ends in excruciating embarrassment in front of his therapist mother, Jean (Gillian Anderson).

Season 1 of *Sex Education* was a huge critical success and, almost certainly, a

commercial hit for Netflix. The US streamer is famously reticent about releasing viewing figures.

"We didn't have any idea that people would respond to the show in this way and, particularly, that the breadth of audience would be as it is," said executive producer Jamie Campbell, creative director of Eleven Film, which makes the series.

Campbell was speaking as part of a three-person panel with casting

director Lauren Evans and location manager Midge Ferguson, which followed the screening of the first episode of the new eight-part series.

Sex Education attracts “an audience that is very youthful and an audience that is very senile – and lots [of people] in between,” joked Campbell. “People think it has something very contemporary to say, which can appeal both to very young and old people.”

The series, in which Otis Milburn offers advice on sex to his fellow sixth-form pupils – mixes hilarious teenage sexual confusion with a sensitive discussion of sex and relationships. But, added Campbell, *Sex Education* is not “didactic”; rather, it is “truthful and emotionally open, which people like”.

Campbell praised series creator Laurie Nunn. “The conceit of the show is very unusual and shouldn’t work,” he said. “It allows you to be broad comedically but also go to some quite dark and emotionally deep places.”

Director Ben Taylor’s input was as important, argued Campbell, as Nunn’s. He explained that Taylor, whose credits include Channel 4 comedy *Catastrophe*, married “Laurie’s vision” to the look and feel of the “American teen movies and high-school TV shows that we grew up with, particularly the John Hughes movies”. Hughes made his name with 1980s teen films such as *The Breakfast Club* and *Pretty in Pink*.

“There’s an innocence about those shows and an aspirational quality,” said Campbell. British series, he continued, tend to focus on “what a horrible experience [school] is”. “And often it is, so that’s fair enough, but one of the things we wanted to do was to say that our characters were going to look back and feel it was the best time of their lives, rather than a time to escape from.”

Sex Education’s cast is a mix of the famous and experienced – Anderson, Butterfield and, new for season 2, Anne-Marie Duff – and first-timers.

Discussing how she cast the show, Lauren Evans admitted that, initially, “it was a daunting challenge”. “With a younger cast... some of whom had never [acted] before, it’s about feel... and trying to assess quickly whether they’ve got potential.”

Cast diversity, she said, was critical: “It was hugely important to find an eclectic ensemble that was representative, so everyone could see themselves on screen.”

The sexually explicit nature of the show led to Evans enduring “some of

‘THESE WERE SOME OF THE MOST EMBARRASSING PHONE CALLS OF MY LIFE’

the most embarrassing phone calls of my life. These were young actors and I had to have a conversation [with them], making it transparent from the beginning that it’s got sexual content... and, especially in this climate, to make sure everybody feels that they’re armed with the knowledge of what the show’s about, how we’re going to shoot it and what is required of each character, so that they could make an informed decision before they committed [to it].”

An integrity co-ordinator was brought on board for filming “so that all these scenes of a sexual nature [could be] broken down and almost choreographed. Everyone talks through what they are and are not comfortable with – everyone has a voice,” said Evans.

“It is amazing to think that, even as recently as five years ago, I would say more than 90% of productions would have no parameters to work with,” added Campbell. “In physically intimate scenes... you’d just cross your fingers, go for it and hope that everyone was OK. That was good because people, on the whole, have good intentions, but you want to make sure that people feel and are safe.”

Sex Education is set in the fictional Moordale Secondary, filmed in Caerleon, South Wales. The series makes the most of the Wye Valley’s many beauty spots, few of which have been seen in TV drama before.

Wales offered “extraordinary places to shoot”, said Campbell, and the

‘NETFLIX TOLD US... TO MAKE IT THE MOST “AUTHORIALLY” PURE SHOW THAT WE COULD MAKE’

opportunity to tap into South Wales’s ready supply of production crews. Since the BBC decided to shoot *Doctor Who* in Wales some 15 years ago, many shows, such as *Casualty*, have followed in its wake, bringing behind-the-camera talent with them.

“I found most of the locations driving around and getting lost,” explained location manager Midge Ferguson, who grew up in nearby Monmouth.

“A lot of shows end up using the same old locations – if you’ve ever been down Bute Street in [Cardiff] Bay, you know it’s had the shit shot out of it. Trying to find [places] that are fresh as well as aesthetically brilliant is what I’m after. Wales is just full of fantastic places.”

“I had a good chat with the director, Ben Taylor, and the [production] designer, [Samantha Harley], about their thinking, so I had an idea of what I was looking for. Then, I literally headed off in a direction that I thought I might find them. I had good days and bad days.

“You spend a long time driving around and [asking yourself whether a location] is interesting or says something about a character. After a while, you get to know what works and why it works.”

“Midge took us around in his car and showed us [some locations outside] Caerleon,” recalled Campbell. “He was showing us stuff that we were getting blown away by.”

The show’s location, however, remains unspecified, which gives *Sex Education* a universal feel. “It is its own place,” said Campbell.

Working for Netflix, Campbell continued, had been “unequivocally a great experience”.

He added: “It really backed the script and Ben’s creative vision for how to shoot it, and told us to get on with it and make it the most ‘authorially’ pure show that we could make.”

“That is an unusual approach. Most broadcasters ask you to shape it for a particular demographic.”

“As producers of the show, it’s a very liberating process.” ■

Report by Matthew Bell. ‘Sex Education series 2 screening and Q&A’ was the first joint venture between RTS Cymru Wales and Bafta Cymru. It was held at the Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff on 15 January and chaired by BBC Radio 1 presenter Steffan Powell. The event was produced by Edward Russell for RTS Cymru Wales.

Inside the writers room

At an RTS masterclass, showrunner **Frank Spotnitz**, whose credits include *The X-Files*, guides students through the craft of storytelling

It's 2010, and screenwriter and showrunner Frank Spotnitz sits in a plane at LAX ahead of a 10-hour flight, eager to begin his new life. On the strength of a deal with Sky to air his new spy thriller *Hunted*, he has sold up, lock, stock and barrel, in the US, and is moving his business, his family and dogs to London.

As the plane taxis to the runway for take-off, he takes a quick call from one of his producers, only to be told that Sky has cancelled the show. Suddenly, Spotnitz is unemployed; *Hunted* seems dead in the water, along with his European dream.

"But you have to be brave in this business," he told the capacity audience at an RTS North West Masterclass. "It's my theme: don't give up.... It's the most important thing, not just for writing, but for anything in life."

It turns out that *Hunted* was dropped to allow Sky to renew *Strike Back* for a second season. "So I get myself a British agent... and the next day she calls and says, 'You're not going to believe it. I have a job for you already. On *Strike Back*'

"And when the BBC green-lit *Hunted*, Cinemax was so happy with the work I'd done on *Strike Back*, that it came on board with *Hunted*, and doubled the budget of that show overnight."

Following a seven-year career in journalism, Spotnitz cut his TV writing teeth on the groundbreaking sci-fi show *The X-Files*. He started on the series as a staffer in the writers room – "my second film school" – after meeting the show's creator, Chris Carter, at a book group.

The writer believes that an important reason for the show's massive success – 99 awards and 217 nominations, including five Golden Globes

– was its "world-building". In other words, "establishing the place and culture of the imaginary world you've invented".

A key part of this is "making things believable", he explained. "We always had the motto [that], 'It's only as scary as it's believable'. We wanted you to be afraid to turn off the lights after watching the show. Our strategy for doing that was [to write] everyday situations with ordinary people."

He carried this mantra forward when building the worlds for his other shows. One example was the dystopian thriller *The Man in the High Castle*, adapted from the Philip K Dick novel for Amazon. "The book has no narrative... but I wanted to honour Philip K Dick, so what I did was ask, 'What is this book about?' [It's about] how you hold on to your humanity when you're living in an inhuman world."

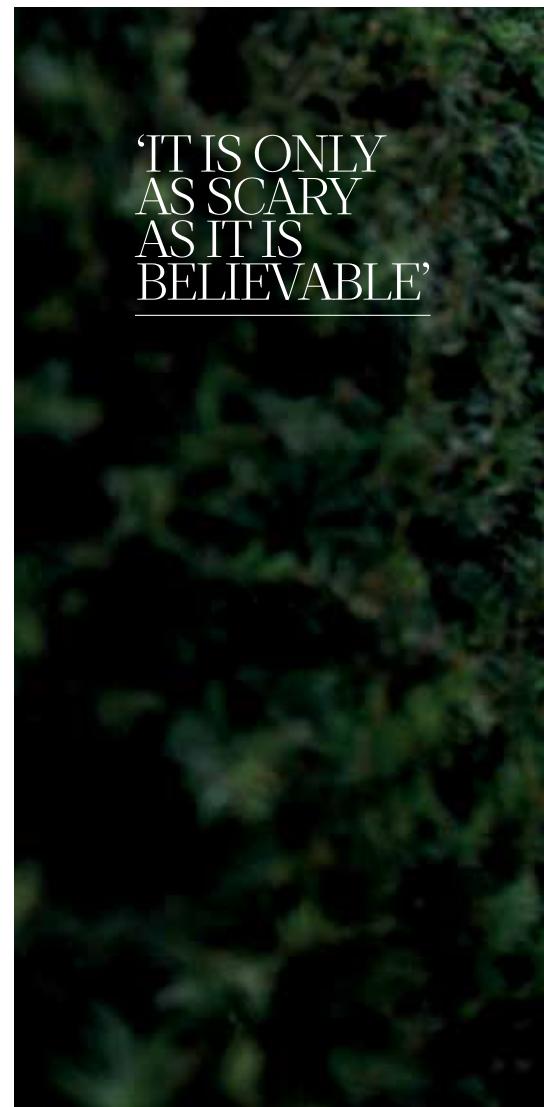
He illustrated his point by showing the RTS a clip of the show, set in a world where Germany and Japan had won the Second World War, in which a "nice all-American, average-guy state trooper" casually explains that, "on Tuesdays, the local hospital burns 'cripples' and the terminally ill".

"That's what's so horrifying," Spotnitz emphasised. "Not that they do it, but that a nice man doesn't care."

Similarly, the Nazi officer played by Rufus Sewell is a good, nurturing father. "You can feel it's believable. That's why I wanted to do the show. I wanted to say that... [what happened] in the Germany of the 1930s and 1940s can happen anywhere, any time.... Good people can do evil things."

He gave the many students in the audience an appreciation of what it's like to work in a writers room. "In the

'IT IS ONLY AS SCARY AS IT IS BELIEVABLE'



US, we have 24 episodes a year. The studio wants the crew to be shooting every day – they have air dates to meet... The crew needs a new script every eight business days. And it has to work.

"You never have a writers room on the first episode. The first episode is a template where the show is defined.

"[Afterwards], you probably have six to eight writers in the writers room... focused on solving problems together. It creates an efficiency and a speed. And you might get a better idea than you ever would have thought of on your own."

Asked if the writers-room system was competitive, Spotnitz said that a good writers room was self-regulating, because this week "it might be my turn and I'm soliciting ideas from you, but next week it'll be your turn and you'll be soliciting ideas from me and the rest of the writers. There's courtesy and integrity, because you know your turn will come."



Hunted

BBC

The showrunner is in charge of the room and their decision is final.

"When building a writers room... I 'cast' it. I ask: 'What kinds of conversations will we have in that room?' I want people with different strengths.

"Deliberately, I don't meet people until I've read their script... I would read your script and you would read mine. Then we'd meet and I'd want to hear what you think of my script. You'd have insights and ideas that are interesting.

"As a showrunner, you want writers who have shown you the respect of reading and understanding what you've done. That way, they can bring you things that you never would have thought of on your own, but that are consistent with what you've created.

"I also ask: 'Will you really be passionate about this show?' Because, if you're not, it's not going to be a happy experience."

The audience gained a valuable insight into the craft of constructing a

story for a TV drama in the US. Traditionally, he said, "the format [for a TV episode] was 47 minutes – a teaser or cold open before the main title, then four acts separated by commercial breaks. The teaser will be five to seven pages, then each of your acts 10 to 12 pages," he said.

Pinning cards to a cork board, Spornitz took the audience through the process. "You write these cards, putting down 'Teaser', 'Act I'.... And then you begin to imagine scenes.... Write a card that describes the scene that you intend to write.

"What you need to know in order to write that card is: how does the scene begin, how does the scene end, what's the conflict in the scene?

"The reason why writing by hand is good is that it makes you slow down and reflect on what you're writing. It gives you time to change things as you go.

"Keep going until you fill up the entire board.... At the end of each act

there should be a mini-cliffhanger.... And, by the time you get to your script, it's much more likely that this road map you're building will work. You can analyse your story: is the action rising, is my protagonist active?

"It's a tool. Although I don't have commercial breaks now, I still write this way."

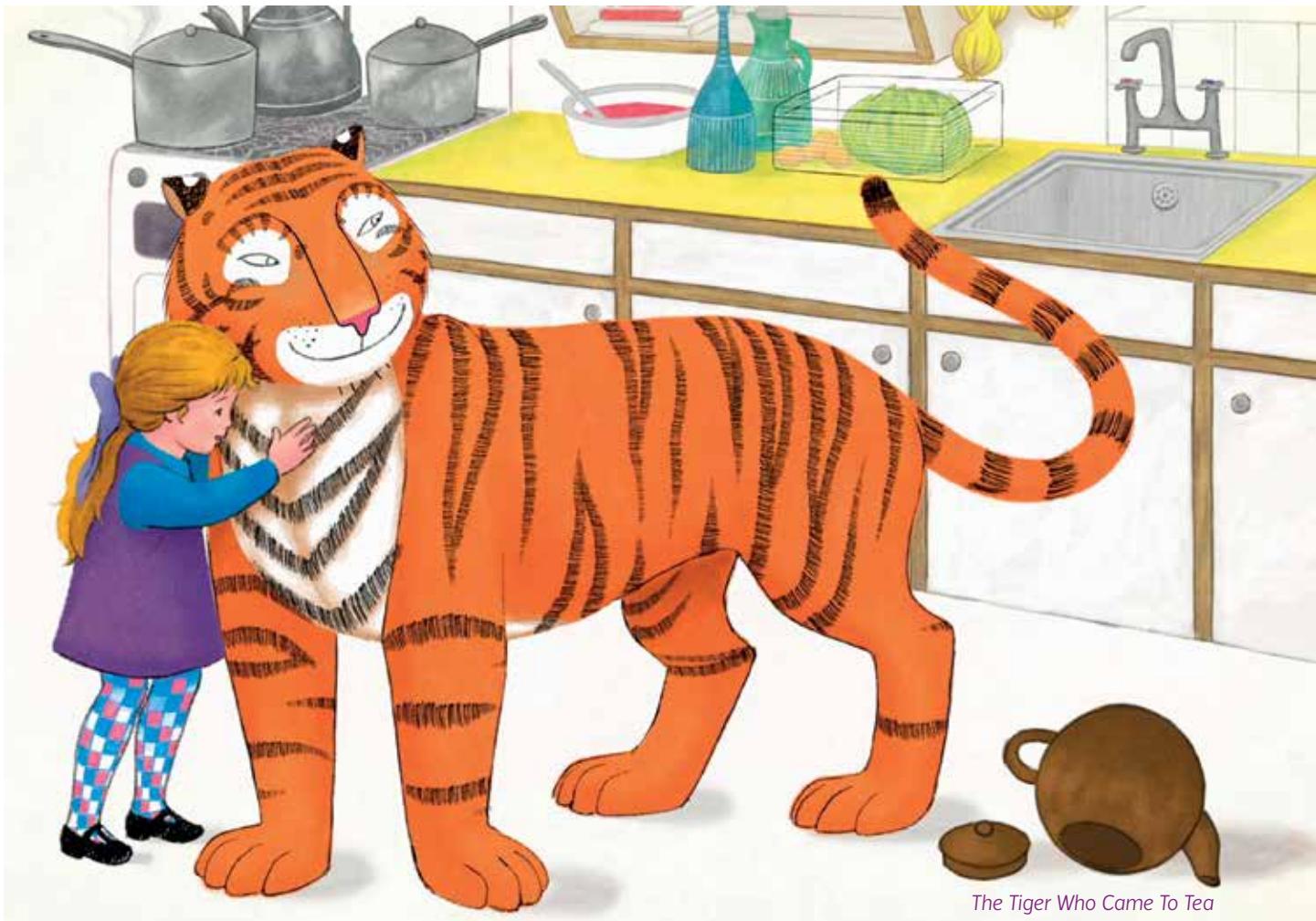
With his latest drama series *Leonardo*, set to hit screens later this year, Spornitz's final advice for the student audience was: "Aim for the stars. Really try to make whatever you write as great as it can be.... Audiences are smart.... Work hard at being smart in your writing, at surprising people."

And, of course: "Don't give up." ■

Report by Carole Solazzo. The RTS masterclass was held on 27 January at the University of Salford. It was hosted by ITV News entertainment correspondent Caroline Whitmore and produced by Rachel Pinkney.

Are the kids alright?

An RTS London event debated the future of children's TV in the online age



The Tiger Who Came To Tea

Children are the canaries in the mine, picking things up first," observed Greg Childs, director of the Children's Media Foundation, as he introduced an RTS debate on how children's TV and content movers and shakers are adapting to the fact that young people have migrated online.

An optimistic tone was established from the start by Alice Webb, the outgoing head of BBC Children's and Education, who asserted: "Yes, the kids are absolutely fine. They have more choice than they ever had. They are exercising choice and are after things that interest them."

"Kids love consuming large amounts

of content. But they love variety, too. Overall, kids are consuming as much or even more public service broadcasting."

Her confidence was grounded in the research she led for the BBC Children's Big Digital Plan around 2015. This resulted in an extra £34m being pumped into a range of new content from 2017, including strands aimed at teenagers up to the age of 16, rather than stopping at around 10.

The initiative has embraced apps and YouTube, with shorter content and animation, but also encourages other BBC commissioners to consider, for example, making more youthful drama.

"As the biggest producer, we are relentlessly focused on them. We think we are the prime choice for children....

We changed ourselves so we are fit for the future," said Webb, who will leave the BBC in March after 15 years. The only option, she added, was more of the same "relentless activity". "The risk is if we stop."

Richard Bradley, executive producer of *Horrible Histories* and Managing Director of Lion TV, responded: "If the kids are alright, I am just hoping the producers and broadcasters are. The conundrum is, [even] with all this demand... why is it so bloody hard to make a living from children's? The public service broadcaster world, the creative ecology, is out of balance. The BBC is the only home."

Netflix, he continued, had opened a door into another world. Productions

were fully funded but “you are competing against producers from all over the world. This is work for hire – your IP is gone. [The streamers] pay a premium for that, though it has started to shrink.”

Bradley wondered whether, since Netflix and others had spotted the BBC’s Natural History Unit’s expertise, “it could do something similar for children’s television?”. The BBC therefore needed to be flexible and “get away from its obsession with channels”.

Now preparing to make the 11th series of *Horrible Histories* for CBBC, with the catalogue available on Netflix, Bradley highlighted how the format had adapted to comedy shorts online. *Horrible History* spoof songs had attracted healthy audiences: 3.8 million views for *Charles II King of Bling* and 2.6 million for *Dick Turpin*.

Childs asked the panel: if an original BBC series such as *Horrible Histories* was watched by children on Netflix, did they even realise CBBC had helped it to prominence? Webb replied: “Predominantly, children know it is a BBC show.”

Bradley had a proposal: “The BBC should make more cultural noise about children’s television. There is no children’s promotion [on BBC One or BBC Two]. Why not promote *Newsround* after the news, *Hetty Feather* after a drama? I urge the public service broadcasters to make more noise about what we do.”

Channel 4 promoted a 30-minute animated version of *The Tiger Who Came To Tea* as its seasonal treat at the end of 2019, Bradley noted, “but children’s TV should not just be for Christmas”.

The third panellist to speak was Emma Scott, Chief Executive of Beano Studios, which, in 2017, updated DC Thomson’s comic underdogs Dennis the Menace and Gnasher for the digital world.

She said it was impossible to fund animation from broadcasters alone, because the deficit-funding model covered only 80% of the budget. Traditionally, the gap would have been funded by selling toys, merchandise and events, but this was breaking down as retailers struggled.

Netflix and YouTube had “cracked

kids and teens inadvertently”, Scott suggested. “They didn’t set out to do it, [but] we should learn from them.” The online companies offered high-quality programming, and earned subscriber loyalty by providing differentiated and trusted content. Moreover, “kids are conservative: they prevent churn”. These factors contributed to Netflix being seen as “a cool brand”.

Beano’s research into the children’s

BFI Young Audiences Content Fund, launched last April. With £57m to distribute, the three-year pilot is aimed at encouraging a plurality of suppliers. The first nine awards include shows for CITV, Channel 5’s *Milkshake!*, S4C and Alba, plus 15 development projects.

“The jury is out,” opined Bradley. “The shows won’t be on screen for another year.... It is too early to assess.”

Childs said that the Children’s Media Foundation was watching the situation very closely, as was Pact. “We are very exercised about future funding,” he said. The experiment will end when the BBC’s licence fee is reviewed in 2022. The hope was that the scheme would be extended.

A looming problem for advertising-funded online children’s content relates to personal data. The Information Commissioner’s Office has proposed sweeping new regulations to protect children’s data online. The Age Appropriate Design Code could result in video sites banning children under 18 to ensure that they are not targeted by commercial messages.

YouTube has already withdrawn advertising from content suitable for children after being fined \$170m in September by the US regulator, the Federal Trade Commission, for violating child privacy laws.

The UK system would carry penalties, including fines, in line with the EU-wide General Data Protection Regulation, introduced in 2018. Meanwhile, the BBC’s bespoke children’s iPlayer is on hold while age restrictions on access are discussed.

The panellists agreed that the BBC needed to press on, and that its role in providing children’s television and content was a key part of its future survival. More canaries in the mine were needed. ■

WITH ALL THIS DEMAND... WHY IS IT SO BLOODY HARD TO MAKE A LIVING FROM CHILDREN’S TV?

market had identified key traits affecting youngsters’ embrace of digital. They were generally questioning and wary, with 58% not prepared to share data. Children also accepted individualism and diversity. Scott saw a future for shared viewing and event television. She cited ITV’s quirky new hit *The Masked Singer* as an attractive example.

Jon Gisby, Managing Director of WildBrain Spark (part of the Canadian WildBrain Group, which owns the rights to *Teletubbies*), said that, while seismic shifts were taking place, with linear-TV squeezed between ad-funded video and SVoD, there was potential for the different pieces to fit together and provide more versatility in the creation of successful shows.

“On content, nothing changes,” he insisted. “We are looking for great stories. If you have a great character, it doesn’t have to be launched... with a TV series.”

Asked whether it was inevitable that local – that is, UK – content would disappear in this global market, Gisby replied: “No. But if it is a uniquely UK, 22-episode series, then it gets harder.”

Another reason for cautious optimism about UK production was the

Report by Maggie Brown. *Are the Kids Alright? The future of children’s TV was an RTS London event held at the University of Westminster, in central London on 22 January. The producers were Carol Owens and Nikki Stearman.*

Custom-made for uncertain times

When Jeff Shell, 54, kicked off his tenure as Chief Executive of NBC-Universal last month, the avid sports fan was faced with a field of play containing many fast-moving players. This is unlikely to faze the one-time high-school basketball player, who has spent his career out-weaving and out-jumping rivals.

"I want to be in a business that needs fixing or is transitioning," Shell told the *Los Angeles Times* when he was Chair of the Universal Filmed Entertainment Group.

"He's wicked smart and he's quicker on the curve than anyone I have ever met," sports executive Tim Leiweke said of his close friend Shell.

A Los Angeles native and a product of the city's public education system, Shell is the oldest of four children born to a cardiologist father and a teacher-therapist mother.

After studying economics and applied mathematics at Berkeley, he got his MBA at Harvard, before kicking off his career at investment bank Salomon Brothers and in strategic planning for Disney.

Shell held several positions at News Corporation, including President of Fox Cable Networks Group, subsequently becoming CEO of Gemstar TV Guide International.

After joining Philadelphia-based cable giant Comcast in 2004, he ran a host of its channels, including E! and its sports networks. When Comcast purchased NBCU in 2011, he was dispatched to London to manage the international business.

Two years later, he became head of Universal, despite his lack of movie biz experience – or perhaps because of it: Comcast was said to have wanted a Hollywood outsider, albeit one of the corporation's most trusted lieutenants, to shake up the film division.

Profile

Jeff Shell, the new CEO of NBCUniversal, is known for his innate smartness and willingness to work harder than his colleagues. Leo Barraclough reports

Taking Universal movie properties such as *Despicable Me* and *Fast and Furious*, Shell focused on building them into lucrative franchises. Key to this was creating ancillary revenue from consumer products and harnessing the promotional power of the wider Comcast group to supersize them into global brands. This strategy was known internally as Symphony.

Shell is a no-nonsense executive with a ready grasp of complex business details; he's also been praised for being thoughtful and capable of acts of kindness. He shouldn't be seen as a softy, though.

He is admired for his ability to be decisive when adapting to new circumstances. Within weeks of NBCU buying DreamWorks Animation, home of *Shrek*, in 2016, Shell announced that some 200 jobs would go at the animation studio as it was rapidly integrated into its new parent operations.

Last year, he merged NBCU's international and US film and TV operations, which coincided with news that Kevin MacLellan, the Chair of NBCU's global distribution and international operations, was exiting the company after nearly two decades.

Shell seems custom-made for such uncertain times. The challenges that the TV business faces now in some

ways resemble the state of the movie business when Shell took over Universal. It is a world he described as "scary and changing, and, if you just stay where you are, you going to die eventually".

Chris Meledandri, the producer of Universal hits such as *Despicable Me*, *Sing* and *The Secret Life of Pets*, has said of Shell: "One of Jeff's secret powers [is...] either he has no fear or he can compartmentalise his fear in a way that I have never seen before, which is critical because, to me, the challenge of the film industry remaining creative comes down to managing our own fear."

Shell has demonstrated his willingness to challenge existing ecosystems. When he was in charge of the Universal movie business, he signalled his openness to a narrowing of the theatrical window for films, a move that risked antagonising cinema chain owners.

Steve Burke, Shell's former boss at NBCU, who now chairs the group, has praised him for his humility and ability as a team player. Describing himself as a "business person", Shell acknowledges that, at the core of the entertainment business, are "art" and "artists". "The best way to manage a creative business is to be there, to help and support but stay out of the way, and let artists be artists and film-makers be film-makers, and create their magic without any of us business people getting too involved," he said during a panel on creativity.

At a gala event held in his honour, Shell was asked what the best advice was that he had received as a student was. "To outwork everybody – smarts are important but the hard work gets you further than your intelligence," he replied. He ascribed his success to being "lucky and having good people around me... I don't think I'm that smart."

He admitted to being "too direct" in his dealings with colleagues, which he



Jeff Shell

NBCUniversal

'EITHER HE HAS NO FEAR OR HE CAN COMPARTMENTALISE HIS FEAR IN A WAY I HAVE NEVER SEEN BEFORE'

saw as both his best and worst quality. Shell put this down to his need to be "honest".

He has interests beyond entertainment. His politics are left of centre – he was a fervent supporter of Barack Obama. Shell and his wife, Laura, last year hosted a fundraiser for Senator Kamala Harris at their home, when she was vying for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Obama nominated Shell to the Broadcasting Board of Governors, now known as the US Agency for Global Media, which operates various

state-run media outlets such as Voice of America. This role led to his detention for several hours at Moscow airport in 2016, before being deported to the Netherlands.

Shell even took time recently to come to the rescue, with other white knights, of legendary Beverly Hills eatery Nate 'n Al's. In sport, he supports the Dodgers baseball team.

One of Shell's first challenges as NBCU's new leader is to ensure it competes in the streaming wars; its own platform, Peacock, launches in April. This will be an advertising-supported

service, with a free basic tier and a paid-for premium tier, although Comcast subscribers will get this as part of their bundle.

In the US, the company's ownership of rights to the Tokyo Olympics will help draw the eyeballs that will bring advertisers to Peacock, says Tim Westcott, research director for channels and programming at IHS Markit.

The venture will use the same digital infrastructure that supports Sky's Now streaming platform in Europe, one example of the many synergies that Shell will look to develop between the two Comcast units.

Among the shows to feature on Peacock will be the US version of *The Office*, after it ends its run on Netflix in 2021, plus a swathe of NBCU-produced and acquired shows that are being commissioned specifically for the platform.

Co-productions with Sky are also in the works. However, NBCU will continue to license many of its shows to third-party buyers, both in the US and internationally.

Shell's brief, of course, encompasses far more than Peacock and NBC. Other parts of the empire include Spanish-language network Telemundo, NBCU's cable networks, such as USA Network, Syfy and Bravo, its film studios Universal and DreamWorks Animation, movie ticketing company Fandango, and the Universal Studios theme parks.

Another challenge for Shell to grapple with is NBCU's news division, which has been under a cloud following its handling of Ronan Farrow's reporting on Harvey Weinstein, and Today anchor Matt Lauer's departure amid an alleged sexual harassment scandal. Another priority is the launch of an international news channel with Sky.

With the Comcast brass cheering him on, and with the support of his colleagues at Sky, Shell is a new giant of the global media arena, albeit a humble one. ■



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George Shiers, a distinguished US television historian, was a

long-standing member of the RTS. The Shiers Trust grant is now in its 20th year.

Application procedure

Applications are now invited and should be submitted to the Trustees by Friday **27 March 2020** on the official application form.

**[www.rts.org.uk/
shiers-trust-award](http://www.rts.org.uk/shiers-trust-award)**

RTS NEWS

RTS Midlands Thomas Shelby may have put Birmingham on the world map but it was another bad boy – Ebenezer Scrooge – who took centre stage when *Peaky Blinders* creator and writer Steven Knight gave a master-class at BBC Birmingham.

The December event – organised by BBC Birmingham in partnership with RTS Midlands – celebrated the writer's latest project, a three-part adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*, a highlight of BBC One's festive schedule.

Knight's gritty and bleak take on the Dickens classic found favour with critics.

It has been adapted countless times, which is why Knight said he undertook a detailed study of the original text in search of a fresh take on a familiar story.

"If Dickens was around now, he'd probably be writing returning television series because he wrote in episodes and he managed to create characters that seem to be eternal, with Scrooge probably the pre-eminent one," he said.

"I was particularly taken with the paragraphs where Dickens goes off at a tangent. They don't move the plot along but they do give an insight into the characters, particularly Scrooge. I studied



BBC

Knight rides critical wave

them forensically and thought, 'He's like this but why is he like this? What made him become that person?'

"There are some surprises and some shocks but I hope people will return to the book and realise where they've come from."

Knight has not just helped to make the Brummie accent cool, he's also passionate

about putting Birmingham on the map. He told the audience that he'd just visited the proposed site of his new TV and film studios in the city's Digbeth district.

"The need for studio space in this country is alarming now. There's a reason why the Americans want to come here. What we can offer in Birmingham is film studios

not at London prices but within striking distance of London," he said.

The studios promise to be a game-changer for the region's creative sector. Add to that, Knight's pledge to film series 7 of *Peaky Blinders* in Birmingham, and it's no wonder the city sees him as the gift that keeps giving.

Teresa Bogan

Students caught Red Handed in Devon

Devon and Cornwall RTS Devon and Cornwall members and local students went behind the scenes of a full-scale streaming webcast at a workshop held in association with Devon indie Red Handed TV in December.

The webcast was a 10-minute scripted piece about the judging of the RTS

centre's 2020 Student Awards. It was designed to demonstrate all the skills needed to run a live broadcast, as well as to promote the awards.

At the workshop, Red Handed's crew broke down the different aspects of the broadcast through demonstrations and gave attendees

hands-on experience of using the kit.

All the attendees had time to speak with the technical crew and see every element of the event, from presenting and scripting through to camerawork, sound and streaming.

The event was organised by Red Handed's head of

production Robin Johnston.

RTS Devon and Cornwall is planning to run a larger event later in 2020 to give more people the opportunity of behind-the-scenes access to a broadcast production – and even to take on some of the roles of the crew when it goes live.

Rick Horne

RTS NEWS

RTS news IN BRIEF

Production on the rise in the East

RTS East held its latest networking event at the Forum in Norwich in mid-January. More than 30 industry professionals and students gathered to make connections and discuss TV production in the East of England. Businesses that have relocated from London to Norfolk spoke about the opportunities available to them and their clients, including reduced costs, lower environmental impact, and great locations and facilities.

Scotland enjoys a busy year

RTS Scotland kicked off 2020 with its annual general meeting and an 'alternative' Burns night celebration at the Glasgow Art Club in late January. The AGM report revealed a busy 2019, which included a growth in membership and a record number of entries to the centre's awards. Members and guests enjoyed an evening of entertainment from a local women's comedy group, Witsherface, in celebration of Scotland's national poet, Robert Burns.

Newcastle cinema hosts RTS quiz

RTS North East and the Border's annual quiz moved to a new venue, the Tyneside Cinema in Newcastle, and welcomed a new host, Doctor Velvet. The quiz, which was held shortly before Christmas, drew a crowd of 60.



Backwater

IADT/NFS

Dublin celebrates award-laden film

Republic of Ireland

The multi-award-winning student film *Backwater* received an enthusiastic response from a capacity audience at RTÉ in Dublin in December.

Director Brendan McCallion and producer Frank

O'Malley were both students at IADT/NFS Dun Laoghaire, Dublin, and their film took the Drama prize at the RTS Republic of Ireland Student Television Awards last year.

Backwater went on to win three national RTS awards in

the undergraduate category for Drama, Camera and Editing, before enjoying further success in Ireland at the Richard Harris International Film Festival, Disappear Here Film Festival and Underground Cinema Awards.

It also won Best Student Film and Best Young Actor awards at the Los Angeles Film Awards.

Backwater looks at the lives of a young man and his elderly father. It is a film of great tenderness and sensitivity, addressing questions of rural isolation, old age and the onset of dementia, and the onerous duties of care demanded of the younger generation. McCallion and O'Malley revealed that they had personal experience of the film's subject matter.

Casting was a key element: rather than starting with a script, they used workshops to develop character and dialogue.

Their advice to young film-makers was to choose wisely when it comes to the story: pick something you care deeply about – and then make sure your cast is exactly what you want.

Agnes Cogan

Cinelab opens its doors

Thames Valley

Many believe advances in digital acquisition have consigned film to the history books, but Adrian Bull and John Mahtani, co-founders of Cinelab London, dismissed this belief as they delivered a passionate discourse on why film remains relevant. The duo were talking at an RTS Thames Valley event, "21st century film", in December.

The demand for higher-quality content has led to a

resurgence in film, which exceeds the current demands for dynamic range and resolution – while delivering a unique film aesthetic.

Cinelab, which was founded in 2013, offers a wide range of integrated film and digital services, and has worked with more than 500 cinematographers. It processes all film formats, from Super 8 to 65mm and its work includes feature films, TV series, commercials

and music videos. The Slough facility employs a team of 27 film enthusiasts.

When they formed the company, Bull and Mahtani expected it to focus largely on film archives and restoration. Although it continues to remaster original film stock for concerts and events, Cinelab has seen a massive increase in the use of film in both features and adverts.

The duo gave their RTS guests a tour of the Cinelab facility, including the film processing and scanning areas.

Tony Orme

RTS EVENTS

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National events

RTS EARLY-EVENING EVENT

Thursday 20 February

Screening and Q&A for *Flesh and Blood*

Q&A with writer and executive producer Sarah Williams, director Louise Hooper, executive producer Kate Bartlett and producer Letitia Knight. 6:00pm for 6:30pm
Venue: Curzon Soho, 99 Shaftesbury Avenue, London W1D 5DY

RTS AWARDS

Wednesday 26 February 2020

RTS Television Journalism Awards 2020

Sponsored by Avid
Venue: London Hilton on Park Lane, London W1K 1BE

RTS EARLY-EVENING EVENT

Thursday 27 February

Screening and Q&A for *Liar, episode 1 of series 2*

Q&A with producers Harry and Jack Williams and stars Joanne Froggatt and Katherine Kelly. 6:00pm for 6:30pm
Venue: Curzon Bloomsbury, Brunswick Centre, London WC1N 1AW

RTS AWARDS

Tuesday 17 March 2020

RTS Programme Awards 2020

In partnership with Audio Network
Venue: Grosvenor House Hotel, London W1K 7TN

Local events

DEVON AND CORNWALL

Wednesday 25 March

RTS Devon and Cornwall Student Television Awards 2020

6:00pm for 6:30pm.
Venue: Jill Craigie Cinema, University of Plymouth, Drake Circus, Plymouth PL4 8AA
■ Jane Hudson
■ RTSDevonandCornwall@rts.org.uk

EAST

Wednesday 4 March

RTS East Awards and Student Television Awards 2020

Black Tie event. 7:00pm-11:00pm
Venue: The Assembly House, Theatre Street, Norwich NR2 1RQ
■ Jayne Greene 07792 776585
■ RTSEast@rts.org.uk

ISLE OF MAN

■ Michael Wilson

■ michael.wilson@isleofmedia.org

LONDON

Wednesday 4 March

Protecting our TV heritage

Panellists: Charles Fairall, head of conservation, BFI; Megan McCooley, moving image archivist, Yorkshire Film Archive; Kay Page, Co-MD, Northbound TV; Jennifer Wilson, data and taxonomy manager, BBC Scotland. Chair: Sue Malden, RTS Archive Group. 6:30pm for 7:00pm
Venue: University of Westminster, 309 Upper Regent Street, London W1B 2HT

Wednesday 18 March

RTS London Student Television Awards 2020

Hosted by Sabrina Grant. 6:30pm
Venue: Channel 4, 126 Horseferry Road, London SW1P 2TX
■ Phil Barnes
■ rts@philipbarnes.com

MIDLANDS

Thursday 19 March

RTS Midlands Student Television Awards 2020

6:30pm for 7:30pm
Venue: BBC Birmingham, The Mailbox, Birmingham B1 1AY
■ Jayne Greene 07792 776585
■ RTSMidlands@rts.org.uk

NORTH EAST AND THE BORDER

Saturday 29 February

RTS North East and the Border Awards 2020

To book your place, please email: jill.hodgson1.rts@btinternet.com
Venue: Hilton Hotel, Bottle Bank, Gateshead NE8 2AR
■ Joanna Makepeace
■ joanna.makepeace@sunderland.ac.uk

NORTH WEST

Monday 24 February

RTS North West Student Media Conference 2020

2:00pm
Venue: Lowry Theatre, Salford Quays, MediaCity UK, Salford M50 3AZ
Monday 24 February
RTS North West Student Television Awards 2020
Presented by Sally Nugent, BBC Breakfast. 6:30pm
Venue: Lowry Theatre, as above
■ Rachel Pinkney 07966 230639
■ RPinkney@rts.org.uk

NORTHERN IRELAND

■ John Mitchell
■ mitch.mvbroadcast@btinternet.com

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

■ Charles Byrne (353) 87251 3092
■ byrneecd@iol.ie

SCOTLAND

Thursday 20 February

The network speaks – with the Creative Diversity Network

Facilitated by Alison Smith, access and engagement officer, Scottish Queer International Film Festival. 3:30pm-6:30pm
Venue: Channel 4, 10 Montrose Street, Glasgow G1 1RE

Thursday 5 March

Inspirational women: International Women's Day event

Joint event with WFTV Scotland. 6:00pm-8:00pm
Venue: Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow, 232-242 St Vincent Street, Glasgow G2 5RJ

Wednesday 6 May

RTS Scotland Television Awards 2020 nominees party

6:00pm
Venue: Glasgow Art Club, 185 Bath Street, Glasgow G2 4HU
■ Cheryl Strong
■ RTSScotland@rts.org.uk

SOUTHERN

Friday 6 March

RTS Southern Professional and Student Television Awards 2020

7:00pm-late

Venue: Guildhall Winchester, The Broadway, Winchester SO23 9GH

Thursday 12 March

In conversation with Dan Snow

Venue: TBC

Thursday 26 March

Freelancers' fair

Venue: The Vestry, 61 Commercial Road, Southampton SO15 1GG

Thursday 26 March

Working in journalism

Venue: Solent University (TBC)

■ Stephanie Farmer

■ SFarmer@bournemouth.ac.uk

THAMES VALLEY

Tuesday 3 March

Getting started in TV tech roles

Speakers: Adele Fletcher, sound editor; Jonathan Glazier, studio multi-cam director; Hannah Green, camera operator; Tom Metcalf, VT operator, Sky; Tom Morgan, head of client services, Envy Post Production; Claire Wilkie, founder, WilkieTV; Carrie Wootten, director, Rise. Chair: Prof Lyndsay Duthie, head of school, UCA. 5:30pm-7:30pm

Venue: Film and Media Centre, University for the Creative Arts, Falkner Road, Farnham GU9 7DS

■ Tony Orme

■ RTSThamesValley@rts.org.uk

WALES

■ Hywel Wiliam 07980 007841

■ HWiliam@rts.org.uk

WEST OF ENGLAND

Wednesday 26 February

RTS West of England Student Television Awards 2020

6:30pm-9:00pm

Venue: Everyman Cinema Bristol, 44 Whiteladies Rd, Bristol BS8 2NH

Sunday 29 March

RTS West of England Awards 2020

Venue: Bristol Old Vic, King Street, Bristol BS1 4ED

■ Suzy Lambert

■ suzylambert@rts.org.uk

YORKSHIRE

■ Lisa Holdsworth 07790 145280

■ lisa@allnewwordproductions.co.uk

OFF MESSAGE

Not exactly a quiet start to 2020. Tony Hall's decision to step down surprised quite a few. Some in the know – or who thought they were in the know – believed he would remain in situ to lead the BBC's centenary celebrations in 2022. But all good things come to an end.

Much has been written about how the outgoing Director-General steered the ship following George Entwistle's brief, chaotic regime.

As one insider put it: "Before he came, we were lurching from crisis to crisis. He averted a disastrous melt-down." Too true.

Lord Hall presided over a BBC that, creatively, was often at the very top of its game. Think of genre-defining content such as *Wolf Hall*, *The Night Manager*, *Line of Duty*, *A Very English Scandal*, the recent *The Trial of Christine Keeler* and the consistent success of *Strictly*.

Or the apparently never-ending gems from the Natural History Unit and the brilliant BBC lampoon, *WIA*.

Off Message wishes him well as the new Chair of the National Gallery.

■ Another January surprise was the replacement of Damian Collins MP as Chair of the all-important Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

The very able Collins was, among other things, acclaimed for his work on fake news and interrogating Facebook. He spoke at many RTS events and chaired the Society's All-Party Parliamentary Group. Damian will be

missed. He is succeeded by the Conservative MP, Julian Knight. A former BBC consumer affairs reporter, Knight promises to be "a critical friend of the BBC".

At times like these, the BBC needs all the friends it can get, critical or otherwise.

■ Sweeping cuts in news have been the order of the day at Broadcasting House. This is not echoed in the rest of the industry as the UK's TV sector continues to boom.

In 2019, the amount spent on production in the UK exceeded £3.6bn, a hike of 16% on the previous highest on record, according to figures published by the British Film Institute last month.

High-end drama was largely responsible: it accounted for £1.7bn, a massive increase of 29% on 2018 and a record total.

The Crown, *His Dark Materials*, *Killing Eve*, *Avenue 5* and *The North Water* were all part-filmed in the UK last year. In total, 123 high-end TV productions were shot at least partially on these shores, an impressive figure to celebrate.

■ With so many scripted shows of genuine quality to watch, it's all too easy to miss shows that hover under the radar.

Shrill, the Hulu comedy acquired for BBC Three, may be one show you've missed. The series is based on a memoir written by the American author, comedian and activist, Lindy West. *Shrill: Notes from a Loud Woman*.

If you thought *Fleabag* was

taboo-breaking, *Shrill* enters genuinely fresh territory. Perfect for binge viewing on a winter's evening.

■ Talking of *Fleabag*, you may remember that, back at the RTS Cambridge Convention in September, Netflix's Reed Hastings was asked if there was one British programme he wished he'd made. "We were outbid for *Fleabag*," admitted the Netflix leader.

Channel 4's director of programmes, Ian Katz, was asked a similar question at an RTS session last month. What was the show he'd let slip through his fingers? None other than the multiple award-winner *Killing Eve*.

Let's all hope that Alex Mahon has forgiven him.

■ Finally, Viacom recently welcomed the former ITV Studios high-flyer and Disney executive Maria Kyriacou to its Camden offices as President, ViacomCBS Networks UK & Australia.

She was originally appointed last October – as President, Viacom International Media Networks UK, Northern and Eastern Europe, overseeing channels in some 33 territories. But a recent reorganisation at Viacom means that Kyriacou's role expanded – before she had even started the job.

Her new brief gives her responsibilities for English-language markets in New Zealand, Israel and Ireland, as well as Australia and the UK.

Off Message congratulates her and looks forward to even bigger things for one of the UK's most talented international TV executives.



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