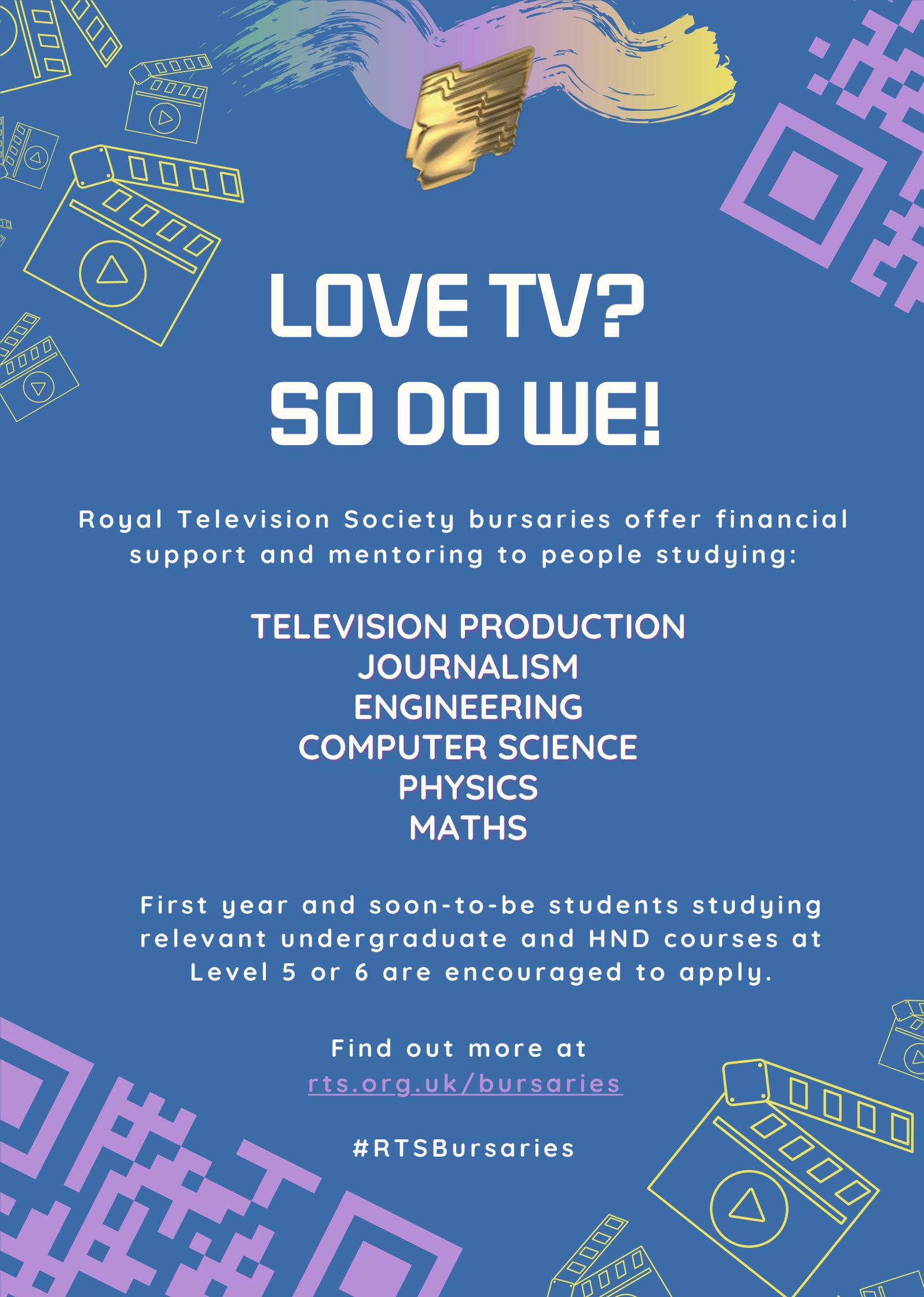


May 2021

Television



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From the CEO



I am thrilled to report on another super-busy line-up of RTS events, hosted both in London and by the RTS's centres across the nations and regions.

The topics have ranged from measuring online audiences to the future of public service broadcasting, and celebrated standout content such as the new BBC Two Iraq war film *Danny Boy* and BBC One's heart-tugging Sunday night flagship, *Call the Midwife*. Congratulations to all those who make the show, which recently marked its tenth anniversary.

Our lunchtime event "Hidden figures: Understanding audiences in the on-demand age" provided some

fascinating takeaways. There was much to learn from all the participants, not least Sky Media's head of insight and research, Lucy Bristowe, who revealed that subscribers to Sky Q watch more content live than do other Sky customers.

I am so grateful to Barb's Justin Sampson for sharing fresh viewing data with the Society, including how audiences responded to season 4 of *The Crown* when it made its debut last autumn. Thanks to all the other panelists and to *Variety's* Manori Ravindran for chairing this headline-grabbing session. Read Torin Douglas's report in this issue.

Our cover story, written by Harry Bennett, looks at how the once niche category of young-adult scripted

shows is taking us all by storm. Think *Sex Education* and *I May Destroy You*.

The phenomenon is another indication of the stunningly high quality of the UK's scripted output, something we should never take for granted.

Don't miss this month's Ear Candy, dedicated to the ingeniously titled *Dead Pilots Society* podcast, in which high-profile actors bring forgotten scripts to life.

Our Comfort Classic is the 1996 state-of-the-nation masterpiece *Our Friends in the North*, which launched the careers of many extraordinary actors.

Theresa Wise

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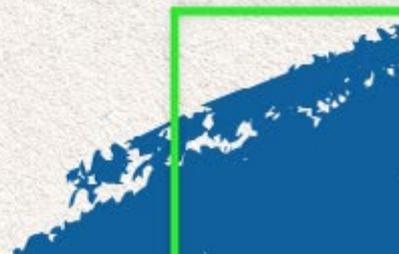
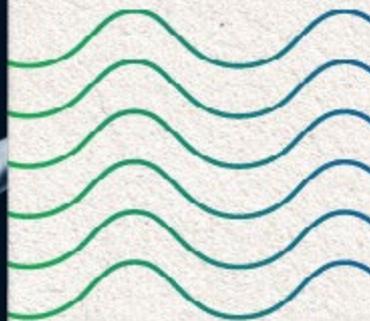
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TV diary

April has been a strange month. It marks exactly 10 years of my career being a film critic – my first appearance was on Radio 1 on April Fools’ Day. My mum, who recorded it (old-school, on a cassette), plays it back to me down the phone and I sound so nervous as I chat to Greg James about why Jake Gyllenhaal’s *Source Code* was a pretty great film and why *Sucker Punch*, starring Vanessa Hudgens... was not.

I was still a student at Reading University but had been thrust into one of the most exciting jobs I could think of.

It was never my plan to be a critic – that job seemed so out of reach – but Radio 1 was scouting for a new film person and decided it wanted a “listener on air” approach, rather than a seasoned expert.

They auditioned us without us realising (as film students, we thought we were just taking part in a film debate) and, after several more informal interviews, they offered me the job (although it took about a year to be convinced that the whole thing wasn’t a giant April Fools’ prank) and I find new things to love about it even now.

■ **On Monday mornings, I have my regular slot on BBC Radio 6 Music with Lauren Laverne, which is genuinely one of the best ways to kick-start my week.**

For several years at Radio 1, I have reviewed whichever films are out at



BBC

Rhianna Dhillon enjoys being pampered like a celebrity

cinemas and quite enjoyed laying into the truly terrible ones. But, with Lauren, the point is that I talk about my top recommendations across cinema, streaming and TV.

For a critic, finding three to critique and not be critical of is more of a challenge. Lauren is so engaged and knowledgeable about film that it makes the job easy and enjoyable.

■ Critics are used to interviewing celebrities but not necessarily to being treated like one. I’ve been given my own dressing room in the bowels of the Royal Albert Hall for this year’s Bafta Craft Awards.

I have had my hair and make-up done by some of the best in the business (I am eternally grateful to anyone who makes me look good for TV).

I scribble last-minute notes while downsizing a glass of Champagne, trying not to smear my lipstick and taking selfies for posterity – because, let’s be honest, this isn’t going to be a

frequent occurrence and I am going to milk it as much as possible.

■ **It has been a very important and memorable year for film – which has seen a much higher level of representation, in terms of diverse and female film-makers being nominated – so it really is a pleasure to be part of a programme dedicated to awards that don’t often get their time in the spotlight.**

My job is to pull out interesting facts about all the crafts and movies but I also love hearing co-host Joanna Scanlan’s anecdotes about being on set. And I am in awe of Clara Amfo’s brilliant hosting skills (and her incredibly white teeth).

■ I’ve heard people say that it has not been a great year for film, given the pandemic, but I disagree. I feel more hopeful about the industry’s future than I have been in a long while. There seem to have been more discussions, debates and arguments about films, perhaps because more people have had time to watch them.

Preferring to wait out the pandemic, huge films have made way for smaller ones, so indie films have found bigger audiences. I’m dreading an influx of movies about the pandemic (nobody wants this) but I’m excited to see how the past year will shape cinema in the coming years. After a rough period, the arts always step up and I don’t think this time will be any different.

Rhianna Dhillon is a broadcaster and film and TV critic.

COMFORT CLASSIC

Few TV dramas deserve the epithet “Shakespearean” or “Tolstoyan” more than Peter Flannery’s *Our Friends in the North*, which turns 25 this year.

The BBC Two series was epic in scale, using more than 160 actors and 3,000 extras to tell the story of post-war Britain, its people and its dirty politics. It is also the tale of four Newcastle friends, who grow up and grow old over three decades. And it is both moving and magnificent.

Frequently judged one of Britain’s best-ever dramas, *Our Friends in the North* opens in 1964 with Geordie (Daniel Craig) and Tosker (Mark Strong) starting a band and hoping old friend Nicky (Christopher Eccleston) will join.

Nicky, recently returned from the US, has a guitar case bearing folk singer Woody Guthrie’s legendary words “This machine kills fascists”, and is forsaking pop for politics. Mary (Gina McKee) is going out with Nicky, but Nicky is consumed by ideology, not lust, and Tosker sees his opportunity...

Over the next three decades, the friends drift in and out of love, and contact. Geordie falls into destitution; Nicky, ever the idealist, is his own worst enemy; foolish Tosker belatedly finds some self-awareness; and Mary, the beating heart of the drama, rises to the top.

The final scene, accompanied by Oasis’s *Don’t Look Back in Anger*, is impossibly poignant: at its recollection now, I am welling up.

Away from the personal, *Our Friends in the North* deals with big issues. Corruption looms large throughout, in local Newcastle politics, Westminster and the police.

Ordinary people suffer, whether they are the tenants of substandard, local-authority housing built on bribes; or Geordie, the victim of corrupt police officers and a Soho sex baron (Malcolm McDowell); or the pickets savagely beaten during the 1984 miners’ strike.

Jarrow-born Flannery was writing from experience: he had witnessed the economic devastation wrought on the North East. *Our Friends in the North* is angry but never righteously so; it is



Our Friends in the North

Matthew Bell salutes Peter Flannery’s epic state-of-the-nation drama

BBC

also warm and funny. Not inaccurately, Flannery has described it as “a posh soap opera with something to say”, although this underplays the series’ huge ambition.

As the Royal Shakespeare Company’s writer in residence, Flannery had penned a stage version of *Our Friends in the North*. The 1982 RSC production was seen by BBC producer Michael Wearing (producer of *Boys from the Blackstuff* and *Edge of Darkness*), who was determined to bring it to television.

It is often said that the BBC moves slowly, and never more so than with *Our Friends in the North*. The corporation was fearful that some of the real-life politicians, thinly disguised in Flannery’s script, would sue.

It was perhaps even more terrified at the budget for a series that was forever expanding in size and scope. Originally, Flannery’s epic ended with the triumph of Margaret Thatcher in 1979; the repeated delays allowed him to take it forward to 1995 as his characters approach middle age. By the time it was shot, a three-hour play had become a nine-part TV drama, with episodes of between 63 and 75 minutes.

Shooting was protracted and riven by rows. Directors changed, scripts were rewritten and whole episodes reshot. Eccleston and Strong didn’t get on and spoke only when the camera was rolling. The budget rose to £8m, a huge amount for the time.

Finally, in 1996, *Our Friends in the North* made it to the screen, and another BBC fear – that audiences would find the politics at the heart of the series a turn-off – proved to be entirely misguided. Viewers and critics loved it, and multiple RTS and Bafta awards followed.

Before the series aired, of the lead actors, only Eccleston had much of a profile (he had appeared in Jimmy McGovern’s *Cracker*). *Our Friends in the North* launched their careers: Craig became Bond; Eccleston regenerated as Doctor Who; McKee later starred in *Notting Hill* and Strong in *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*.

Flannery went on to write the multi-RTS-award-winning Channel 4 drama *The Devil’s Whore*, set during the English Civil War, and then to create the long-running BBC One series *Inspector George Gently*.

But *Our Friends in the North* remains his masterpiece. ■

Our Friends in the North is on BritBox.

Ear candy

Emerald Fennell’s *Space Bound* gets the full read-through



Taylor Jewell/Invision/AP

For every TV flop that made it past a commissioning team, arguably, there is a small-screen masterpiece cast unfairly into the darkness. The next *Fleabag* or *Line of Duty* tossed into the television abyss, taking with it the awards buzz that might have surrounded the breakout stars and the flood of fascinating fan fiction that could have gushed from a new global fan base.

Luckily, the *Dead Pilots Society* podcast is here to bring these forgotten scripts back to life. Presented by writer and producer Ben Blacker and *Friends* producer Andrew Reich, *Dead Pilots Society* gives those overlooked gems that made it to pilot stage without being commissioned for a full series the read-throughs they deserve.

Scripts are dramatically revived and performed by the likes of Richard E Grant, Carey Mulligan, Lolly Adefope,

Sam Richardson, Tony Hale and Adam Scott.

In its revamped format, each read-through episode is followed by a separate interview programme.

The creative minds behind hits such as *The Office*, *Will & Grace* and *Orange Is the New Black* have eye-opening discussions about the development journey of getting a script to screen.

Standout episodes include: the surreal comedy *My Cousin Thor* by *How I Met Your Mother* producer Ira Ungerleider; *Killing Eve* and *Promising Young Woman* writer Emerald Fennell’s intergalactic comedy *Space Bound*; and the adaptation by Mike Royce (*Everybody Loves Raymond*) and Kevin Biegel (*Cougar Town*) of the 1988 film *Big*.

While some shows should have stayed on the cutting-room floor, the misfires of some of TV’s most acclaimed writers are still worth a listen. They might even give hope to all the screenwriters yet to get their big break.

Kate Holman



WORKING LIVES

Writer

BBC
In My Skin

Kayleigh Llewellyn created BBC Three's *In My Skin*, which won the RTS's Drama Series award earlier this year. The Cardiff-born writer can be found on the set of the latest series of the coming-of-age drama – when she is not writing episodes of *Killing Eve*.

What does the job involve?

As a writer, I think it's easy to become overwhelmed and feel inadequate. I like to remind myself that it's not brain surgery; it's storytelling and it is supposed to be fun. I try to shut off the inner critic and listen to my gut.

Surely, it must be a trial sometimes?

The first draft is the hardest: it can take me weeks of procrastination; it feels like torture at times. I pace from room to room in my house, with quite a degree of self-loathing.

But there always comes a point when I hit my stride, and then I can turn out a script quickly in a day or two. Then it becomes joyful.

What is your typical writing day?

I'm quite freewheeling, but that is not something that I would recommend. I suffer from a lack of discipline and extreme procrastination. I always say, "If I'm not scared, I'm not writing." I need hard deadlines.

Are there differences between creating your own show and working on another writer's series?

On someone else's show, you are a cog in the machine. That's not a negative thing: many hands are working to create an end piece and you have to fall in line. To be good at that job, you emulate someone else's voice. You have to appreciate that other people may not agree with you, and be humble.

When you're creating your own show, it's all about finding a way to punch through with your own voice.

You were an actor first?

Yes, I think mostly because I hadn't quite realised that writing was a job.

Growing up in a council house in Wales, a profession in the media wasn't on the cards. But I had a telly. Watching Victoria Wood and *French and Saunders* was the most wonderful thing – I was mesmerised by them. I wanted to do what they were doing.

However, once I moved to London and began training, I realised that writing was what I was passionate about.

Has acting helped you as a writer?

I think it has made me a better writer. I'm obsessed with writing dialogue that actors will relish. I have such a huge respect for the work they do. I use improvisation on set and I encourage the actors to contribute. If a line of dialogue is sticking in their mouths, then I'm happy to let them change it.

Do you still act?

Not often. I loved drama school but I never had what true actors such as Gabrielle Creevy (Bethan) or Jo Hartley (Trina) have in *In My Skin*, that extra

magic ingredient. But I still perform improv comedy in London – that scratches my “show-off” itch.

How did you become a writer?

In 2012, I saw a notice for the Bafta Rocliffe New Writing competition five days before the deadline for entries. With my best friend, Matthew Barry, who'd written a couple of episodes of *Casualty*, I wrote a script about my grandmother.

We won the TV Comedy category, which was incredible, but, beyond that, [BBC controller of comedy commissioning] Shane Allen, who was a judge, ordered the first couple of episodes. This meant that I got paid and was able to find an agent. My entry into the industry was such a gift – but it got very difficult thereafter.

Did the show get made?

No, but no script is ever wasted. It opened a lot of doors for me.

What was the first TV show you wrote?

Sky One's *Stella*, which I co-wrote with Matthew. We loved working together but, early on in my career, I struggled to get the industry to view me as an equal partner. Matthew was the more experienced of us and I had a job to convince people I could do it by myself too.

I knew I needed my own calling card, so I wrote a short film, *Oh-Be-Joyful*. It screened at loads of festivals around the world and won awards, and it showed that I could write by myself. Off the back of that, I got hired for *Casualty*.

Was that a good training ground?

Massively so. And *Casualty* remains the most difficult show I've written on. Almost every story has been told before, so you have to be really inventive – with a tiny budget and lots of other constraints.

Learning your craft on a show such as that really sets you up well for a career in this industry. It's a baptism of fire in the best kind of way.

In My Skin draws on your experience of caring for a mother with bipolar disorder. Does this make it hard to write?

A writer needs to show unflinching honesty, which takes bravery. It is frightening at first but it gets easier,



Karla Gowllett

and audiences recognise authenticity.

The hardest part was juggling my responsibilities to my family, because it is not only my story to tell. I had a few months of therapy in the run-up to shooting the pilot because I was agonising over whether I should be doing it. But, while it was exposing and frightening at times, I knew that the story would help other people – and that, in telling it, I would heal myself. Writing *In My Skin* has been so cathartic – it is the best therapy.

What are the best and worst parts of the job?

I love writing – I can't imagine any other job that would give me as much freedom and joy. I make my own days and I get to collaborate with amazing people.

The worst, especially for people from a working-class background, is that it's bloody hard and very expensive to break in. I had a bursary from The Film and TV Charity to keep me going – without its help, I probably would have

had to quit. By the time I became successful, I had a lot of debts to pay off.

Do you go on set?

Yes. Aside from the fact that I intensely enjoy the company of the people I'm working with on *In My Skin*, I also love being able to rewrite the scripts as we go. My being on set allows us the freedom to work fluidly and evolve scenes in the moment. And seeing the actors and our brilliant director, Molly Manners, work their magic is thrilling.

Are there any tricks of the trade you can share?

I'm a big fan of the “vomit draft”. I plan out an episode, and then I start writing and don't stop until it's finished. The key is not to re-read a scene or edit dialogue: if you hit a brick wall, just write any crap and keep going. Once you write “The end”, shut down your computer and walk away.

It's only when you come back the following day that you allow yourself to read it and start editing. It forces you to finish a draft and, when you have the whole thing, you can sculpt it.

What advice would you give to someone wanting to write?

Watch a lot of TV and identify what you love and why. Read scripts of shows that you love and see how the writer put it on the page.

You don't have to write autobiographical scripts, but audiences want a piece of your heart. Find the courage to be vulnerable.

What attracted you to *Killing Eve*?

It blends genres in a way that I love. And I'm also just a huge fan of the show. Even now, one year into the job, I still get a thrill writing Villanelle's name [Jodie Comer's character] on a script.

What do you want to write about in future?

Issues that have affected me. I want to raise awareness about domestic violence, mental health and LGBTQ [issues]. And pierce it all with some comedy. ■

Kayleigh Llewellyn was interviewed by Matthew Bell. The writer is represented by Casarotto Ramsay.

Shows once aimed at under-25s are reaching beyond their target demographic, reports **Harry Bennett**

On the day before Netflix released the first series of *Sex Education*, Jamie Campbell, creative director of the producer, Eleven Film, recommended the series to his friend's 18-year-old daughter. As a high-school drama about the sexual misadventures of teenagers, Campbell assumed *Sex Education* would resonate with her. She agreed to call the next day to share her thoughts, but when she did, she said she hadn't watched it.

When she got home, her mother, who was in her late fifties, had already started watching. Given the subject matter, she said she'd prefer to watch it in a parent-free zone.

Campbell asked her if her mother had liked it: "She said, 'The thing is, I got up the next day and my mum had stayed up until four in the morning to watch all the episodes.'"

Sex Education is just one of many young-adult series that are striking a chord with audiences older than the generation they depict. In the recent past, *Normal People*, *I May Destroy You*, *Feel Good*, *Ackley Bridge* and *Industry* have all won audiences in their millions.

The mainstream success of young-adult TV signals a change in viewing habits across all demographics. Arguably, it shows a growing sophistication among audiences, who increasingly discriminate more by quality than by genre. This has been matched by a change in programming across all channels to align with these new habits.

It is a trend that can be traced, in part, to the rise of the streaming and catch-up services, where broadcasters can promote what were once regarded as niche shows to help them break through to mass viewership.

Netflix could reasonably claim to have been the prime mover in this paradigm shift. Unshackled from the linear schedule and the demands of advertisers, the streamer could afford to commission programmes for what, in the past, would have been niche audiences, and without, say, a specific age group in mind.

Sex Education



Young adult goes mainstream

Netflix

“The process with *Sex Education* really bore that out,” says Campbell. “Netflix was not looking for a show that would cater to a particular demographic in a strict way. The thing it was interested in was executing the concept of the show in as authored and free a way as possible.”

The platform has, in fact, abandoned demographics altogether in favour of what Campbell describes as “taste communities” (groups of users sharing similar viewing histories). Even then, these aggregations are only used to drive users to new content.

With *Sex Education*, says Campbell, Netflix did what it does for every series. It put it out on the service indiscriminately at first, allowing time for data analysis to find the “communities” with which it resonated. Only once these had been identified did the streamer begin targeting, by positioning the series on the Netflix homepages of other members of those same “communities” – be they a 58-year-old mother or her 18-year-old daughter.

Targeting is one thing, consumption is another but, as Wayne Garvie, President of international production at Sony Pictures Television, points out, the bingeing enabled by streaming services promotes experimentation. Even if you don’t like the first episode of a series, the second is only an auto-play away – by which time you might be hooked. “With traditional free-to-air TV, you’ve got to come back to the same place in a week’s time. It doesn’t lend itself to trying out the esoteric and the eclectic,” he says.

A case in point is *Alex Rider*, Sony Pictures’ eight-part adaptation of Anthony Horowitz’s bestselling series of young-adult spy novels. Sony had fully funded the project but, when the company started selling the show, Garvie noted a problem – even though “everyone loved it”. What “became clear was that, if you were a linear broadcaster, you couldn’t work out where it would sit in the schedule”.

This is a serious issue for broadcasters, Garvie acknowledges, as “they are terrified of losing their core audience, which is always older than you think”. But he remembers a “big lesson” he learnt during his time at the BBC: 20 years ago, the most popular programme for young audiences was *EastEnders*. “It has always been a myth that you only watch people of your own age on screen.”

Alex Rider may be about an adolescent spy, but Sony’s research indicated that

‘IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN A MYTH THAT YOU ONLY WATCH PEOPLE OF YOUR OWN AGE ON SCREEN’

the series would bring in older viewers. Amazon Prime Video eventually secured the rights and, Garvie notes, “it has done exactly that”.

The times are changing, however, and, as Garvie observes, “broadcasters are slowly weaning themselves off the crack cocaine of a schedule. They can’t go cold turkey but, as they themselves

adult drama *Skins*, which launched in 2007, with reinventing the genre and providing it with an authentic edge.

At the time, there was an abundance of young-adult series but, as the show’s co-creator Bryan Elsley recalls, “they were quite safe and anodyne”.

Elsley says that it was his son, *Skins* co-writer Jamie Brittain, who first alerted him to the gap in the market. “In all those shows, kids would have problems and they’d get worse and worse and worse and, eventually, they’d go to their mum or dad. So Jamie’s idea was: what if your mum and dad’s idea of a solution is fucking stupid?”

Elsley hired a team combining TV veterans and young newbies to ensure they could write authentically about the thornier (and hornier) side of teenagehood. Sexuality, gender, mental



Channel 4

become digital channels, it’s going to change absolutely the kind of choices they make.”

Similarly, Campbell has noticed a “virtuous circle” at play in that, seeing the mainstream appeal of *Sex Education* on the streamers, linear broadcasters are “taking more of a chance on shows that would otherwise be traditionally ‘young adult’”.

Channel 4’s approach, says head of drama Caroline Hollick, is to commission series that, while they might have a younger focus or younger protagonists, their “storytelling has a sophistication and its themes and emotions have a universality to them”.

In so doing, Channel 4 can minimise the risk that Garvie referred to of losing the generally older-skewing core audience of a broadcaster.

Hollick credits Channel 4’s young

health, substance abuse – no issue was off limits, and the sixth formers at *Skins*’ centre were left to their own devices to tackle them.

The result was a winning rejoinder to the conventional young-adult fare of the time, as *Skins* removed the gloss and applied grit to the genre.

Today’s young-adult shows invariably tackle tough themes and, in doing so, can break through to mainstream audiences – provided that they are marketed cleverly or algorithmically targeted.

Consider such recent shows as *I May Destroy You*, *The End of the F***ing World*, *Normal People*, *Ackley Bridge* and, of course, *Sex Education*. The stories are told inclusively and the series are targeted indiscriminately. Viewers young and old are spoiled rotten, so is it any surprise that so many of us are tuning in? ■

Leader of the Pact



John McVay

Pact

When, 20 years ago, John McVay became CEO of the producers' lobby group Pact, his first outing to the world of London TV types did not go according to plan. Flying down from his native Edinburgh and travelling to Soho via the Heathrow Express, the train caught fire and he was stuck on the line outside Paddington for two hours. By the time he arrived at the farewell party for his predecessor, he was conspicuously sober while his new colleagues were too merry to give him their proper attention.

Two decades later, McVay is widely regarded as one of the most influential media people in the capital. He was made an OBE in 2019 for his services to the creative industries, and famously wore a kilt to his presentation at Buckingham Palace.

This year, he has been recognised for his work in persuading the Treasury to set up a £500m insurance fund for productions and for helping to create

Steve Clarke profiles Pact CEO **John McVay** and discovers how he helped secure Treasury backing for last summer's Production Restart

Covid-secure studios and sets. At a stroke, this enabled the UK television sector to restart filming after the pandemic had shuttered much of the industry.

In March, Pact received a Special Award at the RTS Programme Awards while the Broadcasting Press Guild presented him with the Harvey Lee Award, a prize for outstanding contribution to broadcasting.

McVay's achievements over two decades, the Production Restart initiative aside, have helped pave the way for what is unquestionably the most

dynamic independent TV production sector in the world, worth around £3.3bn annually to the British economy.

That McVay has accomplished all this without many of the privileges that most of his peers grew up with is all the more remarkable. What, then, is the knack to successful lobbying?

"Evidence and argument and understanding the situation the politicians are in," he says matter-of-factly during a Zoom call from his north London home before taking another pull on his e-cigarette. "People assume I've done a law degree. I have no training. I've picked up everything. I have a magpie mind. I assimilate things very quickly and retain a lot of information and detail. This is very helpful when you are talking to politicians about detail."

What he doesn't say is that he clearly has that rare ability of being able to get on with people from all kinds of backgrounds and to adapt to the ever-evolving media agenda.

Typically, he doesn't miss a beat when I suggest that he has a chip on his shoulder. "Of course, I have. If I

didn't have an attitude... You can cut my head off and I'll grow another one, right? Years ago, someone said to me: 'Aren't you worried that you'll never get a job at the BBC?' I said, 'No. It is never going to hire someone like me.'

In the days when TV industry conferences took place physically, McVay's pushy presence would be an inevitable part of the proceedings, as this imposing figure, fond of acronyms, stood up to speak.

To the outsider, what he said might have sounded arcane. Yet, behind the raw, Scots swagger lies a deeply effective operator, who is a fearless advocate for the 750 or so indies that are on Pact's books.

He is proud of the fact that, during last spring's lockdown, he refunded members half their subscription fees and gave free membership to new companies for six months.

"We're not always the most popular people with broadcasters," he admits. "As I recently said to [BBC Director-General] Tim Davie, 'Just remember, we'll always be there to kick your shins and we'll never go away.'"

Unambiguous communication was one of the skills McVay learnt growing up on a sink estate in Edinburgh. His father was a painter and decorator too fond of a drink, who left the family home when McVay, the oldest of identical twin boys, was 14.

His mother had several jobs, including as a hospital carer on the night shift. McVay's grandfather, a postman who worked on the London-to-Edinburgh night train, was influential in the future Pact CEO's upbringing. "My granddad used to say to me: 'If you ever see an opportunity, stick your hand up whether you know how to do it or not.'"

He left school – a local comprehensive – at 16 with barely any qualifications and began gigging with his brother, who grew up to be a successful tour manager. "For me, like many others, university wasn't an option," says McVay.

The pair performed together in the

post-punk band Visitors, even appearing three times on Radio 1's influential *John Peel Show* and releasing several singles.

A few years ago, an album was released that compiled these various recordings; McVay played keyboards, rudimentary saxophone and sang. He still keeps a keyboard in his home office.

The band, which played support on the same bill as such luminaries as The Clash and Cocteau Twins, led to McVay developing contacts on the local music scene, where he also worked as a sound engineer and producer and put on gigs.

Making music videos inevitably led to working on TV shows under the umbrella of the Edinburgh Film

and Television Workshop, an early Channel 4 initiative backed by the then-powerful ACTT union.

His freelance work came to an end in 1986, when he took a position running a TV production training scheme for underprivileged youngsters backed by Edinburgh council. "We were taking kids who normally wouldn't get in the door at BBC Scotland and preparing them for a career in TV, be they wanting to work as a camera operator, in make-up or as a writer.

"They were talented but they didn't know the right people."

His skills as an organiser led to him being appointed the founding director of the Research Centre for Television and Interactivity in Glasgow, then

director of training and education at Scottish Screen and CEO of Scottish Broadcast and Film Training. When he was headhunted to apply for the job of running Pact, he claims he was considered "a rank outsider".

McVay was interviewed by nine people from Pact's council,

then chaired by the legendary Beryl Vertue, one of Britain's pioneering independent producers. "I think I was there to offer a bit of contrast to the other candidates." But the outsider was now heading for the inside track.

He and his young family upped sticks and moved from Edinburgh to >

'WE'LL ALWAYS BE THERE TO KICK YOUR SHINS AND WE'LL NEVER GO AWAY'

'THE BBC IS NEVER GOING TO HIRE SOMEONE LIKE ME'

John McVay on... the BBC

'I suppose I get disappointed because the BBC is an amazing thing. It's a really valuable asset that we created for our society and our economy, and I get disappointed when it lets us down... It should be held to the highest standards because it is paid for by us. It represents us, so it should be about us.'

'At Pact, we will die in the ditch for the licence fee but we won't die in the ditch for the people who spend the money.'

On... politics

'I'm a Blairite, with quite a number of libertarian, free-market principles.'

On... time off

'I love fly fishing for trout or sea trout and collecting designer ceramics. For reading, I particularly enjoy historical biographies and books such as Mary Beard's *SPQR* and Max Hastings's history of the Vietnam war.'

► London. “Scotland is a lovely place but, essentially, it’s a village and I wanted to play on a bigger stage.”

His first big win at Pact came in 2002 and became law in the 2003 Communications Act. The combined firepower of McVay and another Scot, Pact’s then-Chair and CEO of Shed Productions, Eileen Gallagher, had persuaded politicians and policy makers that indie producers should finally



McVay and his band’s first EP, *Electric Heat*

be able to retain the rights to the shows they made.

For years, broadcasters had resisted the move. Until then, Pact had been divided over whether to campaign for a larger production quota at broadcasters or to go all out for owning the IP. Research commissioned at the time by McVay suggested that the sector, then worth £700m annually, with average margins of around 3% to 4%, was facing financial meltdown. This helped persuade Pact to campaign for rights ownership.

The triumph led to *Campaign* describing Pact as “the most successful lobbying organisation in the UK”.

How did he pull off this watershed change? “It was a combination of the right people in government and having the right Chair and right CEO at Pact, plus the ITC. They deserve credit and paid attention to these white, whingeing producers. [Culture secretary] Tessa Jowell was a champion, so was David Puttnam and [Labour peer] Alf Dubs.”

But how much credit should he take? “Some.... The great thing about

Pact, and it’s one of the reasons I’ve stayed so long, is that independent producers are some of the most determined, disruptive and entrepreneurial people you’ll ever meet.”

He adds: “I remember saying to someone at the BBC, ‘Don’t ever think you can out-think us.’ I have access to several hundred of the brightest people in the industry. All you’ve got is the same three strategy people who turn up tomorrow morning.”

If winning the ability for indies to keep their own rights was arguably the



single biggest achievement of McVay’s 20 years at Pact, the achievements of last spring and summer represented another milestone in the CEO’s journey. With TV production held hostage by Covid-19, McVay and his colleagues needed to think fast about how it could restart safely.

In early April, he circulated a paper written by Hakan Kousetta (who subsequently became Chair of Pact last December), to stakeholders, including the BFI and broadcasters, pointing out that insurance was the major problem preventing production from restarting. After meetings with

**‘DON’T EVER
THINK YOU CAN
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INDUSTRY’**

insurance brokers and insurers, it became clear that no one would insure producers against an outbreak of coronavirus.

By clever lobbying, Pact ensured that this was brought to the attention of Rishi Sunak. At first, the Chancellor’s team at the Treasury was unsympathetic. “I remember a conversation with a senior Treasury advisor, who said: ‘You bunch of luvvies, you never vote for us anyway. Is this really a problem or are you just whingeing?’”

Pact stressed that, without a state-backed insurance scheme, the TV marketplace could grind to a halt and precipitate an acute shortage of content. “This is fundamental to the entire broadcasting ecology, not just my members’ businesses,” McVay told Sunak’s aides. “In May last year, the world was in meltdown – politicians were firefighting,” he recalls. “The fact that we even got a chance to speak to them was a bloody miracle.”

The talks dragged on as it emerged that the Treasury would pay for a high-level task force to examine the problem. At the end of July, culture secretary Oliver Dowden announced the Production Restart insurance initiative for film and TV production. The scheme went live in October.

McVay pays tribute to Sara Geater, the All3Media COO and former Pact Chair, and the other senior producers who helped him lead the charge.

“We made it clear to the Treasury that this would be good for the public,” he emphasises. “We weren’t asking for a bailout. We were asking for an indemnity fund that we might need to use.... There was a return on investment because people would stop being furloughed.”

McVay is 61 this year but there is no sign of him slowing down. He concedes that a succession plan at Pact will need to be put in place. “There’ll come a point when young blood and new thinking will be needed. I hope that’s not tomorrow but...”

Broadcasters might not always be pleased to see him, but they both share a common aim: the continued health of the UK’s world-class audiovisual sector, vital to our cultural and economic well-being.

“I think we’ve played our part,” he reflects. “We’ve shown that, if British creative entrepreneurs are given the opportunity and the right underpinning, they can take on the world.”

A bit like John McVay. ■

OUR FRIEND IN THE NORTH WEST

MediaCity in Salford, Greater Manchester, began its rapid expansion into a world-leading TV production centre 10 years ago, when BBC staff moved in soon after Dock 10 launched its new studios and post-production business.

Back in 2007, when Salford City Council and the Peel Group won their joint bid to house the BBC's new northern base, I received a call from a very animated Felicity Goodey, the main visionary behind the project.

With great passion, she told me how MediaCity's piazza would be bigger than Trafalgar Square and would become a tourist destination. Felicity's interest in Salford's derelict docks and the Manchester Ship Canal began in the 1980s, when she was the BBC's business correspondent for the regional news show *North West Tonight*. She was right on both counts.

This once downtrodden area, where *A Taste of Honey* was famously filmed, attracts visitors from across the country. Its size has been integral to its success.

The BBC employs around 3,000 people on this vast, 80-hectare site, but its move to Salford as a founder partner in MediaCity has resulted in another 4,000 jobs being created. In its recent report on the impact of the BBC on the UK economy, KPMG says employment in the digital and creative sector in Salford jumped by 142% between 2010 and 2019, while the number of digital and creative businesses shot up by 70%.

As every TV viewer in the UK pays the licence fee, it is vital that the BBC creates jobs across the whole country

Cat Lewis
celebrates
MediaCity's first
decade as a UK
production hub



Nine Lives Media

and not just in London. Everyone hopes Channel 4's new bases in Leeds, Bristol and Glasgow will mirror the success of the BBC's move to MediaCity – and help the Government's "levelling up" agenda.

Having major TV production bases in different cities also provides routes into the industry for people from diverse backgrounds. Enabling such voices to be heard helps unify the UK by ensuring the programmes we produce properly represent and engage our viewers.

This is increasingly important when we are competing with global media giants such as Netflix, Amazon and Disney. BBC Director-General Tim Davie recently confirmed that he is doing even more than his predecessors in delivering to the whole of the UK. For the first time in the

corporation's history, the target is to ensure that 60% of production will come from the nations and regions. Therefore, says KPMG, by 2027-28 the BBC will have spent cumulatively £700m more outside of London.

This will generate an estimated additional economic benefit of more than £850m. But it's not just about money and jobs, it's also about how the BBC can increase its ratings and relevance by better reflecting the country as a whole.

I've never understood why important programmes such as Radio 4's *Today* and BBC Two's *Newsnight* are always produced in, and broadcast from, London. So it is fantastic to hear that many editions of these shows will now be hosted from around the UK.

However, to ensure proper representation, it's equally important that these programmes have members of their production teams living in the nations and regions. Now we are all used to working remotely, surely this is a great way to ensure such shows have less of a "Westminster agenda" and are more in touch with audiences?

Plans by Tim Davie and Charlotte Moore for a long-running drama series based in the north are also exciting. Hopefully, it will have more appeal to viewers by capturing the comedy, optimism and warmth of *Coronation Street*, rather than the anxious gloom of *EastEnders*.

It's been really exciting to watch more jobs, more representation and more creativity happening here in MediaCity over the past 10 years.

Happy 10th anniversary. Let's hope the licence fee continues to be used to secure and build on its success. ■

Cat Lewis is CEO of Nine Lives Media and a former Chair of RTS North West.



Channel 4

It's a Sin

Hidden figures

A high-powered RTS panel hears how Barb is poised to publish regular audience figures for streaming services

After years of refusal by the global streaming companies to share their viewing data, new light will soon be shed on the performance of Netflix, Amazon and Disney+ – and PSB streaming services such as All 4 and BBC iPlayer – by the industry ratings body Barb.

From the late summer, Barb expects to publish regular viewing figures for SVoD services on the same basis as those for broadcast television. This will allow meaningful comparisons to be made for the first time.

The move comes as the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee of the House of Commons has recommended that the streamers should be

required to share top-line viewing data for UK shows with Ofcom and domestic broadcasters, so that the full reach of PSB content can be assessed.

At a recent RTS lunchtime event, “Hidden figures: Understanding TV audiences in the on-demand age”, Barb’s Chief Executive, Justin Sampson, unveiled previously unreported figures for the fourth series of *The Crown*. He revealed that 3.7 million people watched episode 1 of the Netflix series during the first seven days it was available. Moreover, “episodes 9 and 10 were watched by around 1.4m people, which points to just under 40% of its viewers getting through the whole series in seven days”.

Sampson also used insights from Channel 4’s *It’s a Sin* to show how

streaming data could increase understanding of audience behaviour, including the relationship between live and on-demand viewing. *It’s a Sin* premiered on Channel 4 on 22 January this year and all five episodes were immediately available on All 4.

The Barb chief said that 4 million people watched episode 5 before it aired in Channel 4’s live linear schedule on 19 February. Far fewer – nearly 900,000 – watched the episode live, while another 1.4 million watched in the four weeks following transmission.

The data also revealed that just under 90% of the series’ pre-broadcast audience watched on a TV set, with the balance split between PCs, tablets and smartphones. Sampson added: “Not surprisingly, the live audience was

almost entirely on the TV set, and just under 10% of the post-broadcast audience watched on a PC, tablet or smartphone.”

He said this showed the value of broadcasters collaborating with Barb. It was much more challenging with the streaming companies, many of which were reluctant to share information. But he revealed that Barb was now in talks with two major streamers over possible collaboration, having been firmly rebuffed by Amazon a year or so ago.

“In 2017, we had an enquiry from Amazon about the possibility of measuring audiences of *The Grand Tour*,” he said. “Our answer was yes — with its co-operation — and we highlighted that, as an industry currency, the numbers would be published to all our subscribers. On that bombshell, the trail went cold.

“In light of this challenge, Barb set out to measure audiences for Amazon and other SVoD services with or without their involvement. And we’re now on the verge of going live with our solutions, as seen in that sneak preview of our figures for *The Crown*.

“We are in the final stages of due diligence, prior to the launch later on in the summer, and we’d be delighted for the streamers to have the collaborative relationship with us that we have with the broadcasters.”

Sampson noted that Netflix had been helpful with technical information when Barb began to attach viewing meters to the wi-fi routers in some of its 5,000 panel homes (traditionally, these have always been attached to the TV set).

And, while he wouldn’t “give a running commentary” on his talks with the streamers, he said a third company was about to start a conversation with Barb.

Speaking in the same RTS session, Sarah Rose, chief operating and commercial officer, UK, for Channel 5’s owner, ViacomCBS Networks International, welcomed Barb’s new research as a “game changer” that would reduce confusion and misunderstanding.

“It’s the easiest mistake to make but a number of commissioners have made it over the years,” she said. “You look at the Barb statistics for linear viewing and then look at the number of streams for VoD and add them together. But you can’t do that, because the number of streams is just the stream-starts, which could be people sampling something and either not liking it or getting interrupted.

“Now that Barb is measuring across

the piece, you get the average audience for VoD, which you can look at in aggregate with linear, and that gives a proper understanding of the scale of viewing, rather than simply taking a very shiny, sexy big number for VoD.”

Lucy Bristowe, Sky Media’s director of insight and research, said: “At Sky, we have a lot of our own data and download information and audience information but it’s quite hard to get into the real demographics — who’s actually in front of the screen watching that piece



of content — and that’s what the Barb technology does very well for us.

“A great recent example was *Your Honor* on Sky Atlantic. From the Barb data, we could see the viewing growing as we pre-TX-ed it and then keep growing, and we could layer on the Barb data to see who those people were in terms of demographics, and [in what other ways] they watched. While big data is fantastic, Barb gives us a fuller picture of what is going on.”

Wayne Garvie, President of international production for Sony Pictures Television, said the figure which stood out for him in Sampson’s presentation was the viewing for *The Crown*, produced by Left Bank Pictures, which is owned by Sony.

He said: “On a platform that is in about half UK households of free-to-air [viewers], it can now reach free-to-air numbers. And if you look at *The Crown* audience and a BBC One audience, they are probably really similar, so that, to me, says that Netflix is mainstream.

“That has an impact on the question of when you sell a show, and where do you sell it? We had a taste of this recently with a show called *Behind Her Eyes*, which could have played on ITV

or the BBC, but went to Netflix and it surprised us all by being such a big success. I know that Anne Mensah [vice-president of original series at Netflix] would like more shows like that — and Justin’s information made me think that mainstream now [includes] Netflix and Amazon.”

Sampson’s final slide showed the weekly reach of the four biggest streaming services, going back to the beginning of August. He said seasonal factors were at play — viewing was

typically higher in the winter than the summer — and the lockdown from 6 January would also have had an effect.

“Having started this period with a weekly reach of just over 25%, Netflix topped 30% during November, when *The Crown* launched,” he said. “During March, it was achieving a weekly reach of around one-third of all [people] aged four and above.

“We can see how YouTube is watched on a TV set by around one in five people, although we know — not shown on this chart — that YouTube generates much larger audiences on smartphones, tablets and PCs than any broadcaster or SVoD services.

“For Amazon Prime Video, the eye is drawn to two spikes in its audience last December. These both coincided with Premier League match days when Amazon had the rights to live-stream all the games.”

Hidden figures no more. ■

Report by Torin Douglas. ‘Hidden figures: Understanding TV audiences in the on-demand age’ was an RTS event held on 20 April. It was chaired by Variety international editor Manori Ravindran. The producer was Steve Clarke.



Leonie Elliott (left) as Lucille Anderson and Helen George as Trixie Franklin

BBC

A social history that delivers

The creator and three of the cast of *Call the Midwife* discuss the secrets of the BBC drama's extraordinary longevity

I can't believe it's been 10 years," said Helen George, who plays Nurse Trixie Franklin in *Call the Midwife*. "It's been a fantastic ride, from not knowing if it was going to be more than six episodes to here – 10 years later."

Rare is the TV drama that makes it to its tenth series. But, since the programme detailing the ever-eventful happenings at the nursing convent of Nonnatus House first appeared on 15 January 2012, it has become a Sunday-evening staple.

The series offers a glimpse of yesteryear London via the microcosm of nurses, nuns and soon-to-be mums, with their values and impositions

reflecting the evolving society around them.

Its longevity was the topic of discussion at the RTS event "Comfort and challenge: celebrating 10 years of *Call the Midwife*".

The secret of its success, according to George, was that, while it was originally based on the memoirs of Jennifer Worth, the show's creator and writer, Heidi Thomas, continued to have "this magnificent way of reflecting what's going on... politically and medically back to Nonnatus House in the 1960s. It makes us all realise that we're going around in circles slightly, and that things sometimes progress, but sometimes they don't."

The three actors on the panel – George, Jenny Agutter, who stars as Sister Julienne, and Leonie Elliott, who plays Lucille Anderson – each presented a clip that, in their view, encapsulated the spirit of *Call the Midwife*.

Demonstrating her point, George's clip was from the finale of the last series, in which Trixie makes an impassioned plea to keep Nonnatus House in public service by reading out the names of 117 women who it had helped.

"It seems so relevant today to list those names, when, on the anniversary of Covid, names were listed in exactly the same way. This was filmed way before Covid, but Heidi has this sixth sense to be able to predict," said George.

“And the symbolic nature of that unity of nurses who are sat opposite a bench of suited men felt a relevant parallel to the Government and the NHS at the moment. It’s an ongoing conversation, which I don’t think has had an end since Clement Attlee started the NHS all those years ago.”

Set in Poplar during the late 1950s and early 1960s, *Call the Midwife* hasn’t shied away from emotive and divisive topics in its depiction of women’s health, the slow advance of society, and life and death. The pill, abortion, teen pregnancy, romance and religion have all been examined.

The thalidomide scandal is a case in point, and was the subject of Thomas’ chosen clip. In the 1950s, the drug was released without being tested properly on pregnant women and used as a treatment for morning sickness.

But it caused defects and fatalities in an estimated 10,000 newborns worldwide before campaigners began questioning the drug’s impact. *Call the Midwife* introduced a storyline involving thalidomide at the end of the fourth series and continued it beyond.

Covering it “made me realise the power of *Call the Midwife*, and also the responsibility,” said Thomas, giving an insight into the thinking behind her writing of the story.

“The thalidomide community have an informal saying: ‘Nothing about us without us’, and, once it became known in the press that we were going to cover this story, we were contacted from many directions, and we really made a point of hearing those voices.

“Because we are a popular drama, we could not only reach a large audience, create conversations and provoke memory with this story, but we were able to do something no documentary could do and go behind the delivery-room door. That was a privilege and a responsibility that I didn’t want to shirk.”

Given the influence of *Call the Midwife*, which regularly draws eight million viewers, Jenny Agutter suggested the topic of cystic fibrosis to Thomas. It was a subject close to Agutter’s heart as the genetic condition runs in her family.

The awareness that the programme brought was significant: “After the episode was shown, the Cystic Fibrosis Trust had more hits on its website than it had ever had,” Agutter said.

The show isn’t only about the big topics, but the little moments, too.

Agutter’s clip was Chummy (played by Miranda Hart) painting her mother’s nails with care and love. “It’s such a simple moment and that’s what’s extraordinary,” she explained.

For Leonie Elliott, playing Lucille Anderson gave her the opportunity to represent the Windrush generation within Britain’s medical community – no pressure, then.

“That [representation] was important. One of my favourite moments is when Lucille finds her church,” she said. “It was an experience that my grandad and a lot of my mum’s cousins had – they were christened in living rooms and they would have services in the living room.

“It’s important for anyone to find their community, but it felt extra special because it spoke to how my family found their community when they came to England.”

Elliott’s chosen clip depicted Lucille’s friendship with the elderly Miss Millgrove. “It speaks to the nature of our show, having so many generations. And also, for me, Caribbean culture is very much about respecting your elders and having a good relationship with them,” she said.

The rich stories of these evolving relationships, their nuances and the subtle reflection of society around them is aided by the show’s longevity. Over the years, certain arcs have slowly come to the fore while others fade into the background as they resolve themselves.

“We have the luxury of a slow burn,” said Thomas. “That might be Lucille’s romance with Cyril, it might be Trixie’s alcoholism – like many people who struggle with addiction, she has had peaks and troughs and periods of stability. We deal in drama not melodrama, so everything has to be earned.”

An upcoming example is Trixie

training as a cervical cytology nurse – cervical screening was introduced in Britain in the 1960s on a voluntary and experimental basis. “As we go forward into series 11, I would like to tell a story where cervical cancer is diagnosed. We haven’t done that yet, but we set the seeds for that almost two years ago,” said Thomas.

Thomas’s immense reservoir of rich stories is arguably another key reason for *Call the Midwife*’s enduring success. When it comes to uncovering these, “I’m looking for stories that grab you in the heart or the throat or the stomach, not the brain,” she said. “It’s something that surprises me. Something that angers me. Something that will make me weep or simply educate me on something I did not know.

“Once I have been grabbed by a story, I look at ways of fleshing it out. By the time we get to script stage, we consult with experts on any medical story.”

With season 10 launched last month, and three further series in the pipeline, we can be assured that the stories told will continue to be uncompromising.

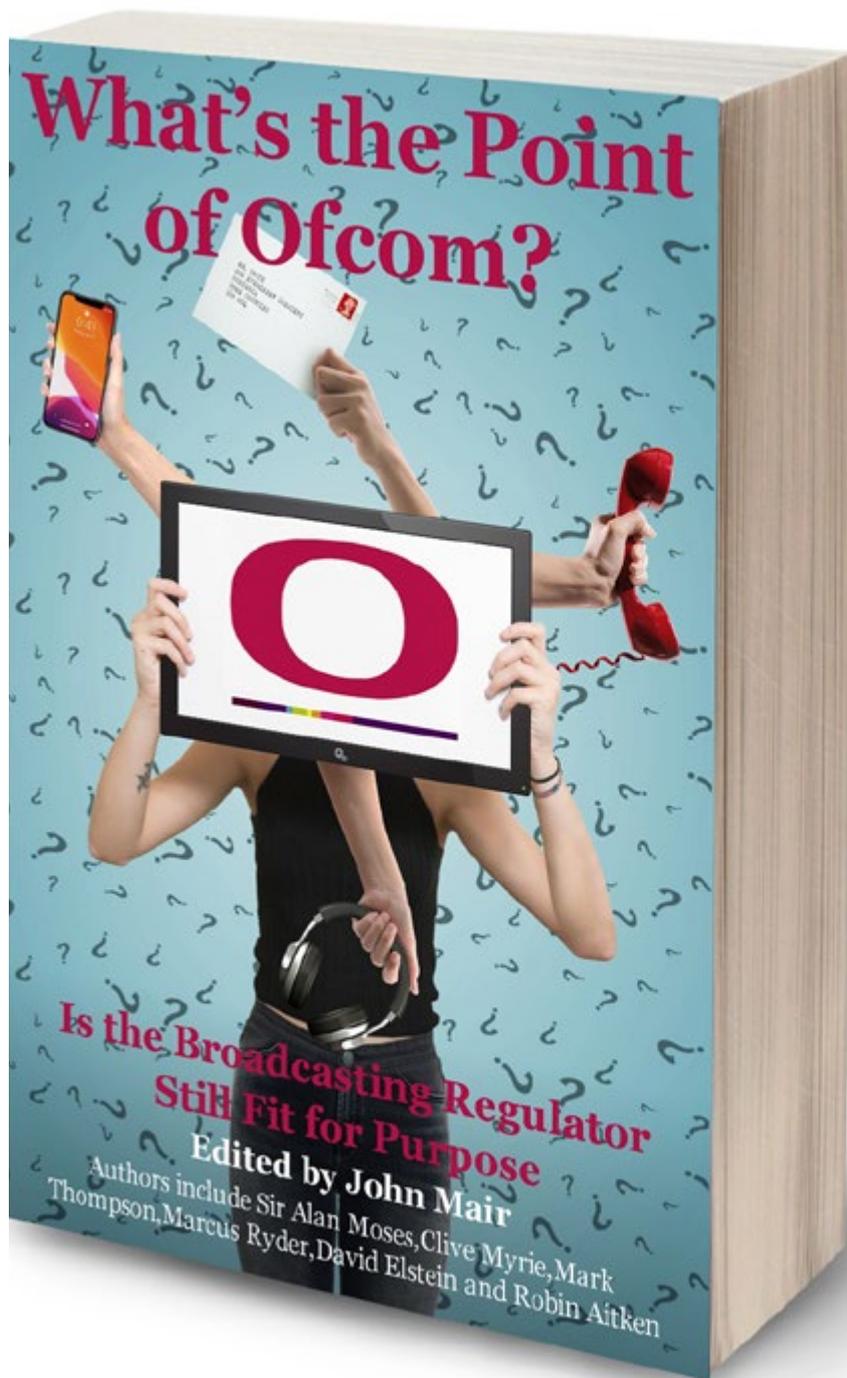
“With *Call the Midwife*, there has never been a story too bold or too dark or just too out there for me to pitch,” said Thomas. “What *Call the Midwife* has given me, which not every writer can say they get in their career, is a home. A home is where you are safe. A home is where you can do bold things. When you have a company like ours, there’s nowhere you’re scared to go.” ■

Report by Shilpa Ganatra. ‘Comfort and challenge: celebrating 10 years of *Call the Midwife*’ was held on 22 March, and chaired by Erica Wagner. The event was produced jointly by the RTS and IJPR.



Jenny Agutter as Sister Julienne

BBC



Fit for purpose?

Narinder Minhas finds much to enjoy in a new collection of essays examining the role of the communications regulator

What's the Point of Ofcom?, edited by John Mair, is published independently, priced £7.99. ISBN: 979-8742003441

can confirm that, growing up as a kid in south-east London, I never once dreamt about becoming a regulator. You know – running organisations that begin with the letters “Of...”. To be honest, I’m not sure that I know anyone who did.

And I’ve certainly not met anyone who had photos of great regulators – if there are any – on their bedroom walls. Me: I just wanted to play for Spurs and open the batting for India. Before you complain, it is possible to feel Indian and British, even English, all at the same time, especially if you weren’t born here.

Talking of complaints and not wishing to fuel our bitter culture wars, are we turning into a nation of TV complainers, offended by the slightest remark that doesn’t fit our rigid view of the world? What’s happened to freedom of speech? Curiosity? Tolerance?

Take, for example, the case of presenter Jeremy Vine, who received numerous Ofcom complaints for asking whether the lack of diversity at Prince Philip’s funeral was a “problem”. Or *Good Morning Britain*’s Dr Hilary Jones, who prompted complaints after she told a Covid-denying pub landlord that he should “stick to pulling pints”.

Strangely, the number of complaints is on the increase as audiences for traditional television channels decline. Perhaps it’s a sign of our increasingly divided and tribal society.

But how seriously should these complaints be taken, given that many appear to be politically motivated and charged? Who should adjudicate and can they really be objective? More widely, what kind of regulatory system does Britain need?

At the heart of this debate is Ofcom, Britain’s broadcasting and communications watchdog. As it approaches its 20th anniversary, it seems right to query its role and remit in our rather polarised society.

In a fascinating book of essays, *What’s the Point of Ofcom?*, those fundamental questions are explored in an unapologetic tone. As John Mair, the editor, writes: “Ofcom is one of the key regulators in 21st-century Britain. It is at the intersection of technology, culture and politics... [but] is it fit for purpose?”

This crucial question is given added spice as we build up to the announcement of the new Chair of Ofcom. Whoever is appointed in the coming weeks – some are suggesting it could be Paul Dacre, the former editor of the *Daily Mail*

– will police the entire communications sector, which includes the BBC, and “soon the giant tech platforms, too”.

The book, thankfully, has a rich range of voices across the political spectrum. Each essay is carefully crafted, from those who believe Ofcom is hopelessly weak to those that think it has assumed too much power. In the end, all of the writers wrestle with that most difficult of questions for any

since to revive the legislation have always stalled on the altar of the First Amendment – the right to free speech”.

As a result of the more “liberal” system in the US, Myrie argues that there is a “trust deficit at the heart of American democracy”, something he witnessed first-hand during last year’s extraordinary presidential election.

Not surprisingly, he says, the BBC is the most trusted news brand across

Some think that Ofcom is too powerful, narrowly framing the national conversation along a broadly “woke” agenda. Others feel that it doesn’t intervene enough and should show its sharp teeth. Marcus Ryder, an academic and former head of current affairs at BBC Scotland, argues that Ofcom’s main job is to fix market failures. And, for him, one of the biggest market failures is the lack of diversity.

‘OFCOM USES ITS POWERS TO BANISH FROM THE AIRWAVES VIEWPOINTS IT DOES NOT LIKE’

‘[OFCOM] LEADS TO THE BLAND LEADING THE BLAND’

‘ONE OF THE BIGGEST MARKET FAILURES IS THE LACK OF DIVERSITY’

society: what is the right balance between freedom and constraint?

Sir Alan Moses kicks off with a strong critique of our current system. He was the first Chair of the Independent Press Standards Organisation and argues that self-regulation is the only way forward. Ultimately, the best checks and balances on any content provider, he says, are the consumers: “It would be worth trying a period without regulation. No regulation for anyone, neither broadcasters, nor the press. I doubt whether they behave worse, they are far too conscious of the need to attract readers, listeners and viewers.”

Moses believes that the current rules governing the public broadcasters have nurtured, in a memorable phrase, a stifling culture that “leads to the bland leading the bland”. In his view, it is the narrow interpretation of the concept of “fairness” that is to blame: “Balance leads all too soon to lack of controversy and lack of controversy to a world of master-cooking and mistress-dancing; there is often a feeble imprecision in the BBC’s ability to hold politicians to account.”

However, BBC journalist Clive Myrie begs to differ. In his essay, he compares the British regulatory framework, with its emphasis on impartiality, with the much more laissez-faire US system.

As Myrie points out, “similar rules did exist in America, but were thrown out more than 30 years ago, when Ronald Reagan was President, and attempts

in America: “In the US, you can say what you like – your opinion is protected, and you can use all your power and might to beam that opinion right across the land, without giving any counterarguments, without reporting the opposing point of view.”

But others contest the idea that Ofcom is a neutral regulator, presiding over broadcasting like some giant referee equipped with VAR for all those instant replays (forgive the football analogy).

Ofcom, for Robin Aitken, a former BBC reporter, is a deeply political organisation – a biased referee, if you like – and should be recognised as such. It may not censor, but it controls public debate: “Whether one calls that ‘censorship’ or not is a semantic argument, but there is no doubt that Ofcom uses its powers to banish from the airwaves viewpoints and ideas it does not like”.

To make his point, Aitken reminds us of the Overton window, a concept in social theory that there is a restricted range of ideas that the public finds acceptable for mainstream debate. He uses the example of Ofcom’s ruling against a broadcaster for interviewing David Icke about his views on how the pandemic “was a ruse by a New World Order to impose its will”. Whatever your take on Icke, Aitken argues, there is no doubt that “Mr Icke’s, and others’, rights to “free speech” were compromised” and Ofcom overstepped its remit.

As an economist, he gently introduces us to “monopsony theory” as a way of explaining this lack of diversity: “A monopsony is when you have lots of sellers of a product but only one buyer. In these circumstances, it is the buyer who can dictate the price and how the market works.”

I had never viewed the lack of diversity as a market failure, but now it makes sense. “It is no coincidence,” says Ryder, “that both the tech and television industries seem to suffer... both have the problem of a few large companies dominating their industries.” He adds: “Monopsonies mean that companies will more likely hire their friends, promote people that look like them and retain people that they like, rather than people who might be the best person for the job.”

This is a book packed with insight. I’ve not even mentioned the brilliant essay by David Elstein on the decline of public service broadcasting, or Steven Barnett’s eloquent reminder of Ofcom’s cultural mission. OK, I won’t be sending in a late application to be Chair of Ofcom, but I’ve got to say that I’ve learnt so much from this absorbing book.

I do hope there are people out there dreaming of becoming a regulator. We definitely need you – if only to widen the choice. ■

Narinder Minhas is Co-Managing Director of Cardiff Productions.

From the battlefield to the courtroom



Anthony Boyle as Brian Wood in *Danny Boy*

BBC

Toby Jones and the creators of the Iraq war drama *Danny Boy* reveal their approach to making the BBC Two film at an RTS event

In 2009, soldiers from the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and the Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment found themselves the subject of a major inquiry into allegations of torture and the murder of Iraqi prisoners.

The inquiry lasted five gruelling years and eventually concluded that the allegations were untrue and "deliberate and calculated lies". A decade after the story made headlines, the high-stakes investigation and the wider theme of morality in war is being dramatised in BBC Two's *Danny Boy*

through the eyes of one of the soldiers involved in the case, Brian Wood.

"When you're bringing real, complex events to an audience, the most effective way in is through a singular perspective," said executive producer Sue Horth, who was also behind the Bafta-winning dramatisation of Damilola Taylor's story, *Damilola, Our Beloved Boy*. Indeed, it was the storytelling technique that made *Chernobyl* so compelling, and brought home the message about systemic racism in the US in *When They See Us*.

Wood made an ideal conduit into

the war and ensuing inquiry because his experience touched on key themes. "Imagine being a soldier who's feted for their heroism, who is awarded a medal, and is then effectively accused of being a war criminal," explained Horth. "How does that feel? At the same time, what are those split-second decisions taken in combat that are then scrutinised with the full glare of legal expertise after the event?"

"The third component was that Brian comes from a family with a 300-years heritage of military service. So [having] that intimate family experience to

explore those relationships of a father who's also a soldier, and a son who's questioning what he may or may not have done, felt really rare to us."

A special story deserves special treatment, and so *Expectation* Entertainment's drama airs as a 90-minute film, with Olivier award-winner Anthony Boyle (*Ordeal by Innocence* and *The Plot Against America*) in the lead role, and Toby Jones (*Detectorists* and *Marvelous*) as the soon-to-be-disgraced human rights solicitor, Phil Shiner.

Toby Jones joined Horth on the RTS panel with director Sam Miller and writer Robert Jones. *Danny Boy* was named after the battle that began this chain of events, explained the screenwriter. It started life as two 60-minute episodes, "but it just called out for being a one-off, and, in a way, that made a lot of editorial decisions for us. It helped to tell a punchier story."

The team had reams of research on the Iraq war and the inquiry, plus source material in the form of Wood's autobiography, *Double Crossed: A Code of Honour, A Complete Betrayal*. Even so, said Robert Jones, they felt forced to hone in on the emotional story at its heart, the story of "our characters, their lives and their families, rather than allowing the inquiry procedure to tell the story for us".

As might be expected, he and the team consciously aimed to balance the truth of the real-life event with the cadence of a high-end drama, especially as Wood was involved in the production process.

"It's not often in a drama like this that you have a key character who has the maturity and has done the work with himself that allows him to have that relationship with the project, and still be able to maintain some creative distance," said Horth.

"We were aware that we were in some fairly cathartic moments for him," added Miller. "As film-makers, we found telling some parts of Brian's story quite emotional at times. He was totally at ease as we went into it, so it helped."

To ensure that Wood was comfortable with Boyle's depiction of him, the crew set up an hour-long meeting between the pair in the rehearsal rooms, which went so well that it ended up lasting all day.

Wood was also involved in the battle scenes to add authenticity, even down to giving advice on the way the soldiers wore their uniforms. "He would encourage Anthony to take his own

beret home and shape it at home in his bathroom, so that it always fell at the right angle," said Miller. "Those kinds of details gave Anthony so much confidence and he was hungry for all of that."

As to the casting, the producers felt they struck lucky with both Anthony

'YOU'RE NOT PLAYING A REAL PERSON, YOU'RE PLAYING A DRAMATIST'S VIEW OF A REAL PERSON'



Toby Jones as Phil Shiner in *Danny Boy*

Boyle and Toby Jones. "Anthony was immediately interested in the ambiguities of the role," said Horth. "His capacity to find those ambiguities exciting, even though they occur within a space of life and death, made him utterly compelling. We were obviously completely honoured to work with Toby as well. It's a rare opportunity to get to work with the legendary Toby Jones."

By coincidence, Jones's wife is a barrister. It meant that she knew all about his character of Phil Shiner, and could help offer more context for his role. But Jones emphasised that it was his job to ignore Shiner's reputation and follow the character that Robert had written instead.

"You're not playing a real person,

you're playing a dramatist's view of a real person," he said. "My job is to humanise him, whether the audience thinks his choices right or wrong. I don't have to have an opinion on all of that. I just have to portray him as clearly as I can."

Production took place under Covid restrictions, with all the bubbling and the paring down of extras that this required. Iraq was recreated in a chalk quarry in Buckinghamshire.

"There were budgetary implications as to whether we ever could have gone abroad, but then, within the Covid framework, there was absolutely no way we could go to Morocco, Tenerife or wherever to seek that landscape," said Miller. "And there were problems even if we did, because of the hardware we needed for the scenes. Even if you could find desert, would you necessarily find the military pieces that you needed to make those scenes?"

From the clips shown in the session, the end result suggests a show that's sensitively brought to our screens while raising weighty questions about morals, war and momentary lapses of judgement.

"Our aim was never to veer too much to one side, not to tell too much of the soldier or too much of Phil Shiner's legal position, but instead keep both those things open and live," said Miller. "Because, in some ways, you can say both characters lost through this sequence. Brian had a very traumatic thing at the beginning, and then was taken through this process. And Shiner was barred at the end of this process, so he was really badly hurt."

"It's a complex story. I hope that we've managed to entertain, but also shed light on it."

Horth agrees: "Something that we thought about was to keep the audience in the present rather than applying our retrospective knowledge on to the storytelling.

"It's valuable to be able to transport the audience so that they experience things as they unfold, and to not have the wisdom of hindsight. If our audience come away from the film more curious or asking more questions than they came to the film with, then I think we've done a good job." ■

Report by Shilpa Ganatra. Journalist Emma Bullimore hosted an RTS Q&A with Toby Jones, Sam Miller, Robert Jones and Sue Horth on 28 April. *Danny Boy* airs on BBC Two and iPlayer at 9:00pm on 12 May.

The royal watch

In the wake of Prince Philip's death, **Roger Mosey** insists that broadcasters covering the Windsors must move with the times



Getty Images

‘**M**odernisation’ is a dangerous word for broadcasters when it comes to coverage of the Royal Family. So, too, is “journalism” if it intrudes too far into the ceremonial. Both are immediately construed by critics, especially those who like to bash the BBC, to mean the abandonment of tradition and a lack of respect for the monarchy.

There have been ceremonial punishments in the national press for those who ventured down the modernising path. These have included the people who tried new approaches in the televising of the Jubilee river pageant in 2012 and those of us implicated in the scandal of the burgundy-coloured tie when Peter Sissons announced the death of the Queen Mother, in 2002.

Journalism earns its practitioners attacks from both sides. Nicholas Witchell, who has covered the royals fairly and dispassionately for BBC news programmes, is regularly the subject of social media mobs alleging establishment bias. But Prince Charles famously said: “I can’t bear that man. I mean, he’s so awful, he really is.”

In reality, the monarchy is one of the national institutions that has

‘NOT OFFENDING
ONE SET OF
STAKEHOLDERS
MANAGED TO
CHEESE OFF
OTHERS’

modernised most successfully. As *The Crown* reminds us, the reign of Elizabeth II began with deference and debutantes; now, Twitter is used to announce the death of Prince Philip. There have been Prince Andrew-shaped missteps in engaging with the media, but the Palace has successfully embraced the digital world and it has never been shy of using television as a means to reach the people.

It is completely right that the style and tone of the broadcasters should change, too. I was in BBC News 20 years ago when the Countess of Wessex was taken ill, and we realised that she was in a category of senior royals that would have meant, if the worst had happened, that all the networks would be merged together for a major obituary.

We guessed that it might not be quite what audiences expected for this

former employee of Capital Radio, however estimable. The broadcasters long ago dispensed with the idea that a royal death would be announced by the tolling of a bell for a full hour.

The deaths of Diana, Princess of Wales, and the Queen Mother were deftly handled by the schedulers. There was a short period in which the same content was broadcast across all channels and then an appropriate length of obituary programming on BBC One and ITV – followed by the reversion to a more normal schedule.

was shut down altogether, even though its scheduled women's football was still available on the red button and iPlayer. Viewing figures plummeted, and this became the most complained-about schedule in the BBC's history.

Clearly, this was a case of an abundance of caution. There was nothing much for the *Daily Mail* to complain about. But it shows the tightrope that broadcasters have to walk, because not offending one set of stakeholders managed to thoroughly cheese off others.

The challenge, of course, is to be able to sense “the national mood” while events are unfolding, and it is an inexact science. I remember the meetings on the day of Diana's death involving the Director-General of the time, John Birt, about when it felt “right” to change the tone. John oversaw the decision we took on Radio 5 Live about when to switch to alternative programming – we went to live tennis at 6:00pm – and at what point the phone lines should open to temper the “top-down” programming with voices that reflected feelings from around the country.

The vociferous response from viewers and listeners to the Prince Philip coverage turned out to be a useful corrective in the days between the death and the funeral. Schedules and news bulletins rapidly retrieved their balance; and the funeral itself was immaculately covered.

The BBC Studios events team, with director Claire Popplewell, is one of the corporation's greatest assets. The UK is also lucky to have such strong news anchors in the likes of Huw Edwards, Tom Bradby, Julie Etchingham and Dermot Murnaghan.

It is, of course, inevitable that they will be back at Windsor at some point in the coming years for the death of the Queen. I am not sure we can yet imagine the scale of the national and global response to the end of the reign of Elizabeth II, and there must be no short-changing of this moment in British history.

It will also be different in that news will break: a new king will be proclaimed in all the nations of the UK and in countries around the world; ambassadors will have audiences at the Palace; new coins and banknotes will be prepared. But this is precisely where the journalism will be needed – to assess the constitutional significance and the level of public support – alongside the retrospectives and the respect.

All of this will be challenging at a time of national mourning, but it is necessary. Public service broadcasting is not easy in a digital world, and in a diverse, disputatious nation. But we should recognise that modernisation has happened and will continue – and that journalism is at the heart of what our broadcasters must offer. ■

Roger Mosey is a former head of BBC Television News and is now the Master of Selwyn College, Cambridge.



Getty Images

ITV went back to its regular programmes on the evening of Diana's death, and BBC One likewise after the Queen Mother's obituary.

Therefore it was a surprise to many when the death of Prince Philip generated a different response. The news teams were sure-footed in their announcements that he had died and in the subsequent coverage. But the programming ran at greater length and on more channels than many insiders had expected.

It had always been the case that controllers of BBC Two had a selection of programmes in their drawer for this kind of event: post-obit, they could run natural history shows or travelogues that were incapable of giving offence.

On 9 April, though, BBC Two ran the same royal content as BBC One from lunchtime until *Newsnight*. BBC Four

It also demonstrates that a lesson learnt at the time of the Queen Mother's death hadn't entirely sunk in: the death of a much-loved but aged figure is not regular “breaking news” and, once the announcement has been made and the prepared obituary played, there is not much more to say.

By hour five, the latest development may only be a statement of condolence from the leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats. Viewers who tuned in at 1:00pm for the early reporting were bemused to see the same items going round and round on every channel for the rest of the day and into the night.

And it is curious that Gyles Brandreth telling semi-amusing anecdotes about Prince Philip can block out all the rest of the world's news. Would anyone really have been offended by updates on Covid or international affairs?



Unforgotten – an ITV show but available on Netflix

PSB at the crossroads

Should traditional broadcasters get special protection in an era of streamers backed by global media giants? An RTS panel weighs the arguments

Public service broadcasters have a “fleeting short space of time” to find a better financing model – and without guaranteed prominence on smart TVs, “PSB is dead, it is over”. These were just two of the stark warnings aired at an RTS panel discussion “Small beer or big deal: Should we still care about PSB?”

But the panellists also looked at what the BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and 5 could themselves do to adapt and thrive. The discussion, chaired by Jane Martinson, Marjorie Deane professor of financial journalism at City, University of London, ranged widely. Key issues included: the introduction of legislation to ensure that TV manufacturers have operating systems that carry PSB apps; a better way to measure the prominence of PSBs in the broadcasting landscape; and a clarion call to radically change the main operators’ funding models.

They started by chewing over the

implications of the publication of Ofcom’s Small Screen: Big Debate consultation on the future of PSB and the recent DCMS select committee report on the subject.

“We have to get beyond broadcasting,” said Emily Bell, founding director and Leonard Tow professor of journalism at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, Columbia University. “What does public service technology look like, what does it mean to have public service technology? We don’t really have much idea how prominence works in the digital world because we don’t have any access to how people are seeing things.”

Both Ofcom and the select committee agreed that maintaining prominence and universality – to enable audiences to find content across platforms amid myriad viewing choices – remains important for PSBs.

“There needs to be political, legislative intervention about how you guarantee prominence for the PSBs – and that isn’t just about making sure they have

prominence on the platforms,” said STV Studios Managing Director David Mortimer. He noted that, as part of its submission to Ofcom, the BBC had warned that 80% of all TVs produced by 2023 would have operating systems installed with no incentive whatsoever to put any of the PSBs in a prominent position.

“It is just as important that we have legislation to regulate the TV manufacturers in a world where people aren’t sticking an aerial into the back of their televisions,” he said.

Jennifer Anafi-Acquah, an assistant producer working across factual, specialist factual and entertainment formats for PSBs and SVoD services, said that younger audiences were moving away from the PSBs: “As a viewer, I am receiving my content less and less from traditional PSB formats.” She acknowledged that PSBs had backed many production companies, and created the opportunity for her to build a career.

With Anafi-Acquah’s generation making viewing choices from smart-TV

menus, built-in apps and social media platforms, “if the PSBs aren’t prominent offerings on smart TVs, then PSB is dead, it is over,” said Mortimer. “Unless we find a way of making it clear that this is an available option – even then, the future looks really bleak.”

Ed Vaizey, a former culture minister and now a peer, noted the demand for attention and the increasing tendency of younger generations to look to other platforms, particularly social media, was a pressure on PSBs.

“Prominence is clearly the issue that people are debating now, and ensuring prominence... is much easier said than done,” said Vaizey. “It is a hugely complex and technical thing to do.”

in the US. “It potentially undercuts the BBC’s ability to make a change, given the financial crisis it faces.”

Vaizey regarded the answer as partly dependent on whether people thought the BBC could depend on a single revenue stream, irrespective of that being a licence fee or a subscription. “It is not wrong for the BBC to have a commercial arm,” he said. “It used to sell me DVDs of shows. One has to be flexible about it.”

Anafi-Acquah believed that consumers, particularly younger ones, were now used to paying for content and buying subscriptions. “If the quality of the content is great, people will pay,” she argued.

public service technologies that go beyond the existing broadcasters. But you also have to have the mindset of protecting that part of the economy.”

With incentives, Bell suggested, the PSBs could decide where the markets were, what to prioritise and [how to] cultivate something that sat outside the pressures of the market. “The one thing we have learnt is that the market does not know best and if you surrender everything to the market you lose a great deal.”

But if the market doesn’t know what is best, what next, asked Martinson?

“If it were left to a completely free market and people only paid for what they valued or what they wanted”, the



From left:
Jane Martinson,
David Mortimer,
Emily Bell, Lord
Vaizey and
Jennifer Anafi-
Acquah

RTS

Mortimer pointed out that the financial realities faced by PSBs meant that producers had to sell their content to Netflix and others. “Unless politicians are prepared to fight for a properly funded BBC and a fairly regulated ITV, STV and Channel 4, then the [PSB] game is up,” he said.

The PSBs urgently needed to find a financing model that worked in the streaming era: “We have a fleeting short space of time as creatives to focus on this challenge. Legislators have a very short space of time to work out what can be done at a national level to make sure the PSBs can survive, let alone prosper.”

The panel debated whether the BBC should switch to a subscription model.

“I wonder whether it was foolish to say to the licence-fee payer, ‘You get everything free on the iPlayer for ever,’” said Mortimer, a former long-serving BBC executive, who now heads STV Studios, having run his own production company and worked at NBCUniversal

Bell agreed that there was room for funding innovation at the BBC. “The licence fee is a historic anomaly. It managed to establish this idea in the public imagination that they owned something. Subscriptions are always transactions. It would be nice to preserve some of that communal ownership that the introduction of the licence fee created in 1922.”

She emphasised that audiovisual policy in the UK needed to protect the PSBs, together with the cultural and democratic values they represent, from the onslaught of commercial platforms. “You have to think about the regulatory landscape and the large platforms. That has been done in Europe, but now that we are no longer part of Europe, we have to think about that separately,” urged Bell. “This is not about changing everything tomorrow. This is about a 10- or 20-year pathway from where we are now to where we might be going.”

She continued: “You have to regulate the platforms, create incentives for

consequences would be unpredictable, Anafi-Acquah worried. “PSBs do a lot that is unknown and there’s a lot of value in this that is unknown.... We would be in danger of losing a lot of the behind-the-scenes benefits that PSB has provided for the infrastructure.”

She reiterated her desire to operate in a world where there were more partnerships with SVoDs: “It would be good if PSB content could be made available in co-operation with platforms such as YouTube, because that is where younger audiences are viewing content.

“From my perspective, going forward would be going to where the audiences already are, rather than trying to run uphill to bring back audiences to traditional forms.” ■

Report by Stuart Kemp. ‘Small beer or big deal: Should we still care about PSB?’ was an RTS event held on 26 April. It was chaired by Jane Martinson and produced by Jonathan Simon, Vicky Fairclough and Kirsten Stevenson.



Black Narcissus: Jonas Mondua worked on the BBC One serial

BBC

Taking their first steps

RTS bursary scheme As this year's RTS bursary schemes open for applications, **Matthew Bell** learns how two of the very first intake have fared in the television industry

Applications are now welcome for the Society's 2021 bursary schemes.

The RTS hopes to award 35 scholarships for TV production or related subjects, with another 10 scholarships going to technology students.

"We are really looking forward to welcoming another band of talented, determined and enthusiastic students," said RTS CEO Theresa Wise.

"All of the students we support come from low-income households and demonstrate an impressive work ethic, as well as bringing new voices and life experiences

into the media industry.

"We take a very flexible approach to the courses we support, as the industry has so many different roles – from director to location scout, set designer or costume-maker."

The bursary scheme began in 2014, and Adam Mann and Jonas Mondua were two of its first bursary scholars.

Since graduating from Teesside University in 2017, Mann has worked on a raft of programmes, including Daniel Dewsbury's RTS award-winning series *The Mighty Redcar* – his first job, as a researcher – and medical observational documentaries

Hospital and *24 Hours in A&E*, on which he was an assistant producer.

Mann credits the RTS bursary scheme for giving him a start in television. "The bursary helps you get your foot in the door – without it, I would have struggled," he says. "With a working-class upbringing, there are so many barriers to getting into the broadcasting industry. The RTS bursary can help to break them down."

His bursary scheme mentor, documentary film-maker James Rogan, was a key influence. "I absorbed anything he told me like a sponge," recalls

Mann. Rogan gave him practical help, too – work experience on his *Panorama* film *Life at 100* during his final year at university.

Jonas Mondua has recently landed a job as a production secretary on series 2 of Netflix hit *Bridgerton*; previously, he has been a production assistant on two other high-end dramas, *Top Boy* and *Black Narcissus*.

He graduated from the University of York in 2017 and jokes that he now feels "like an old man". Mondua credits the RTS bursary scheme with "expanding my mindset". Before winning a place on the scheme, he admits his "knowledge of the industry was very limited".

Bursary events and dinners gave him the opportunity to speak to some of the top talent in the industry. "They gave me a good idea of what is possible in television," he says. "Talking to individuals who are leaders in their field meant I had to come out of my comfort zone.

"It really stretched me and put me in an uncomfortable place but it has certainly equipped me for my work now, where I have to talk to cast members, agents and executive producers."

Mondua says the bursary scheme launched his career in the industry: "It has been amazing, working on shows that I thought would take me years to get on to. But, at the end of the day, it is up to you to make good use of it – you have to put the work in."

He added: "I encourage black students and those from other ethnic groups to apply. I want you to know it's possible to succeed, no matter what your background."

The closing date for applications to this year's RTS bursary schemes is 30 September. ■

The resilience and ingenuity of the TV industry during the past year was once again demonstrated at an RTS North East and the Border session in which programme-makers described how they kept shows on air during the pandemic.

“Covid: Creativity in a crisis”, hosted by presenter/producer Chris Jackson, heard from *Emmerdale* director Ian Bevitt and one of the soap’s stars, Lisa Riley, who plays Mandy Dingle.

They explained how the show, the first domestic soap to return to production following last spring’s lockdown, had adapted to the age of coronavirus.

In pre-Covid days, being on the *Emmerdale* set resembled “*Ben-Hur* in the morning and *Benny Hill* in the afternoon”, said Bevitt, picturing the stately pace of work at the beginning of the day and frenzied afternoons.

He said the introduction of such measures as rigorous social distancing had made filming the Yorkshire-set soap no longer a “kick bollocks scramble”, as nothing was left to chance. Four separate, self-contained “cohorts” were established so that, if there was an outbreak of Covid in one, the other three could continue working.

Riley, videoed giving a whistle-stop tour of the studios where *Emmerdale* is recorded, showed how no one was allowed into the building before their temperature was taken. “Normally, I’d come to work and go to dressing room nine and meet six of my gorgeous fellow cast members – but not now, when I’m all on my own,” she explained.

All actors do their own hair and make-up. The cast are kept away from crew, with



Lisa Riley in *Emmerdale*

ITV

Carry on filming

North East & the Border Steve Clarke hears how the ITV soap *Emmerdale* has adapted and held the pandemic at bay

a minimum distance of two metres maintained between the camera operator and those being filmed. All this is strictly enforced with the famous two-metre pole, now ubiquitous on set.

Surfaces are regularly sanitised, while costumes are laid out in the order in which they are to be worn to minimise touching.

The building has been divided into three zones: red, for actors and crew, green for producers and the script department, and blue (also for actors and crew), to keep

contact down to a minimum.

Scripts have been rewritten to take account of the new protocols. Scenes where two cast members are seen passing, say, a cup of coffee to one another have been banned to prevent the same surfaces being touched.

Paper scripts are now avoided in favour of digital ones – a shift that Victoria Griffin, production co-ordinator for CBBC’s *Danny and Mick*, said contributed to sustainability in the production process.

With fewer actors allowed

in the studio, programme-makers have taken to using dressed-up manikins, rather than people, as extras.

Not that *Emmerdale* has shied away from shooting more ambitious scenes with elaborate stunts involving special effects. The RTS was shown a clip of a hair-raising road accident that led to a massive explosion, all executed within the parameters of Covid-secure filming.

Teesside-based independent producer Matt McGough, who runs Ithica Films, told the RTS that, after last year’s first lockdown, never again would he complain about having too much work. “We were worried that this would bring down the company, but our head of finance worked out that we’d be OK from March until September, even if we didn’t win a single new job,” he recalled. “It was a huge relief to know we could ride this out.”

The furlough scheme helped Ithica to stay afloat until filming started again in early autumn. “Working remotely was very difficult but, fortunately, we had a lot of projects in post-production so we could continue working,” added McGough.

Once the pandemic ends, certain Covid-secure practices are likely to remain. “For most of the 20-odd years I’ve been doing this, the writer has not been in the same room as the director,” said Bevitt. “Now that writers and directors are communicating more, it takes all of the Chinese whispers out of it.”

“One of the positives of the Zoom meeting culture is that the writer, regardless of where they are, can join the director at a script meeting. To be able to talk through any problems in the same virtual room is a real advantage.” ■

A paean to ‘my dad’ woos Lenny Henry

Midlands Centre

Lidia Bieniarz’s *A Film About My Dad* was a double winner at the RTS Midlands Student TV Awards in April. The Anglia Ruskin University student took the Sir Lenny Henry Award for outstanding work and the Short Form prize.

“The film was very moving,” said Henry, who recorded a message for the ceremony. “The whole thing about fathers and their children, fathers and daughters particularly, resonates in my heart. It’s proper lovely.”

Staffordshire University students picked up two main prizes at the online ceremony, which was hosted by BBC Asian Network DJ Bobby Friction. Thomas Read won the Non-scripted award for *Living Off Grid – Brithdir Mawr*, while Georgia Leigh Taylor’s film *Callie* took the Scripted prize. *Callie* also won the award for Writing.

Nottingham Trent University’s Ellen Gordon was also a double winner, triumphing in the Animation and Sound categories with *Polaris*.

“The Midlands is re-emerging as the storytelling heartland for the screen sector. This is reflected in the brilliance of the entries – the judges were blown away by

the inspiring standard of their work,” said RTS Midlands Chair Kully Khalia.

BBC Birmingham sponsored the awards.
Matthew Bell

RTS Midlands Student Television Awards winners

Animation-Polaris•Ellen Gordon, Nottingham Trent University

Non-scripted-Living Off Grid – Brithdir Mawr•Thomas Read, Staffordshire University

Scripted-Callie•Georgia Leigh Taylor, Staffordshire University

Short Form-A Film About My Dad•Lidia Bieniarz, Anglia Ruskin University

Sir Lenny Henry Award-

A Film About My Dad•Lidia Bieniarz, Anglia Ruskin University

Craft Skills: Camera-Lowkey – Bushrod•Thomas Read, Natalie Argent and Tom Connor, Staffordshire University

Craft Skills: Editing-Colorblind•Agata Kazmierczak, Anglia Ruskin University

Craft Skills: Sound-Polaris•Ellen Gordon, Nottingham Trent University

Craft Skills: Writing-Callie•Georgia Leigh Taylor, Staffordshire University

Republic of Ireland

Dara Ó Briain received the Outstanding Contribution award at the inaugural RTS Ireland Television Awards in March.

The comedian and TV presenter gave a deadpan and very funny acceptance speech, lauding “an award that’s chosen for you by a shadowy committee of industry insiders with no accountability, promoting the first year of their awards – that’s the award that really means something”.

Peering closely at the award, Ó Briain added: “You can see where they scratched Graham Norton’s name off!”

Normal People won in the Drama category, with producer Emma Norton accepting the award on behalf of Element Pictures. “*Normal People* was a total joy to make,” she said, adding that Daisy Edgar-Jones and Paul Mescal were the “perfect Marianne and Connell”. She praised director Lenny Abrahamson for “having the vision to create something distinctive and truthful”.

Muireann O’Connell, presenter of Virgin Media One’s *The Six O’Clock Show*, hosted the ceremony, which was broadcast on Virgin Media One in



Dara Ó Briain in RTÉ show *The Panel*

RTÉ

RTS Ireland Television Awards winners

Outstanding Contribution-Dara Ó Briain

Drama-Normal People•Element Pictures for RTÉ

Entertainment-Dancing with the Stars•ShinAwIL for RTÉ One

Factual Series-David Brophy’s Unsung Heroes•Tyrone Productions for RTÉ

Factual Single-Abbeyfealegood•Atom Films for RTÉ One

Factual Specialist-The Funeral Director•GMarsh TV for RTÉ One

News and Current Affairs-RTÉ Investigates – Inside Ireland’s Covid Battle: Life and Death•RTÉ for RTÉ

Animation-The Voyage•JAM Media for RTÉ

Children’s-Tina Times Two•Dyehouse Films for RTÉ

Sport-New Gaels•Poolbeg Productions for RTÉ

Comic lands top prize in Dublin

Ireland. It featured a raft of TV stars introducing the categories, including *Derry Girls* and *Bridgerton* actor Nicola Coughlan, and comedian Ed Byrne.

RTÉ swept the board, winning all the programme awards, including: Entertainment (ShinAwIL’s *Dancing*

with the Stars); Factual Series (Tyrone Productions’ *David Brophy’s Unsung Heroes*); and Specialist Factual (GMarsh TV’s *The Funeral Director*).

RTS Republic of Ireland Vice-Chair Niall Cogley, who organised the awards, said: “There seems to be an

abundance of world-class TV talent in this country.

“In such an extraordinarily difficult year for all those who work in the creative industries, we would like to pay a special tribute to the resilience and talent of all those who work in television, on all sides of the camera. We salute your excellence.”

The Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, RTÉ, Screen Ireland, Sky, TG4 and Virgin Media Television sponsored the awards.

Matthew Bell

A CITV revival of a much-loved children's TV show won the Factual Entertainment prize at the RTS Southern Awards in late April.

Described by the judges as a "modern classic brought bang up to date", Terrific Television's *How* was "a high-energy, high-production-value revival... the series feels modern and fresh while still familiar in its nod to the 'How boss', Fred Dinenage."

The online awards ceremony, hosted by Dinenage, currently the presenter of *ITV News Meridian*, and *BBC South Today's* Anjana Gadgil, featured messages from a host of local TV celebrities, including Nick Knowles, Clare Balding, Dan Snow and Gloria Hunniford.

TVT Productions won the Factual award for *When Tariq Ali Met Malcolm X*, a "stunning documentary [that] combines compelling personal testimony with unique archive footage", said the judges.

Three of the four news categories went to BBC South journalists. Alastair Fee's film *Unsung Heroes*, about the work of NHS porters, cooks and cleaners, won in the Strand within a News or Magazine Programme category.

Ben Moore, who was



Factual Entertainment winner: *How*

TV classic back to winning ways

presented with the Regional TV Journalist award, was "operating at the top of his game", said the judges. "He found unusual ways to tell Covid-related stories, focusing on areas of society otherwise forgotten during the pandemic, reminding us all of its devastating impact."

Moore's BBC South colleague Lewis Coombes took

the Sports Journalist award. ITV News Meridian won in the Regional News Magazine Programme category.

The winners of the student awards came from the Arts University Bournemouth (Animation and Non-scripted), and University of Surrey (Scripted).

"The hardworking professionals across the region and

the talented students who have kept on working throughout successive lockdowns really deserved their awards," said RTS Southern Chair Stephanie Farmer.

Topical Television, Terrific Television and Woodcut Media sponsored the awards, which were produced by Farmer and Vanessa Edwards. **Matthew Bell**

RTS Southern Television Awards winners

Factual Entertainment - *How* - Terrific Television for CITV

Documentary or Factual - *When Tariq Ali Met Malcolm X* - TVT Productions for Smithsonian Channel

Regional News Magazine Programme - *ITV News Meridian*

Strand within a News or Magazine Programme - *Frontline Non-Medical NHS Workers (Unsung Heroes)* - Alastair Fee, BBC South

Regional TV Journalist - Ben Moore - BBC South

Sports Journalist - Lewis Coombes - BBC South

Short Form Content - *Conjoined Twins* - Dave Young, Pod Films for Channel 4 News

Camerawork - Russell Sheath - BBC South

Graphics/Animation - Tito Olawole - Mambo Media

Post-production - Liam Camps - Woodcut Media

Student - Animation - *Spellbound* - Amelia Parker, Arts University Bournemouth

Student - Non-scripted - *Melita* - Matthew Smith and Mitoshka Alkova, Arts University Bournemouth

Student - Scripted - *No Change* - Zak Jaques, University of Surrey

Plymouth and Falmouth divide the spoils

Plymouth College of Art and Falmouth University students shared the prizes at the Devon and Cornwall Student Television Awards in April.

Falmouth University filmmakers won both the Scripted and Non-scripted awards. The Scripted prize went to *Pure*, a drama about two troubled teens. The judges "felt it tackled a big subject really well and with maturity".

Man, Beast and the Heart to Win, a documentary about a

horse-racing trainer, triumphed in the Non-scripted category. The judges were drawn to a "fantastic story, well told, with strong characters and great access".

Plymouth College of Art student Sonny Layton scooped the Animation award for *1977*, a short film about his father's travels in France and Spain, which the judges described as "mesmerising and original". The judges added that they "could feel the love and hard

work that had gone into making it".

Yergalem Caramini, also from Plymouth College of Art, received the Craft Skills: Production Design award for *La Volpe*. The judges loved the

use of the set dressings and small details to tell the story, praising the "fabulous originality and the flawless, professional quality achieved during lockdown".

Matthew Bell

RTS Devon and Cornwall Student Television Awards winners

Animation - *1977* - Sonny Layton, Plymouth College of Art

Non-scripted - *Man, Beast and the Heart to Win* - Hal Bartlett, Will Eastwick-Field, David Jones, Ross Charette,

Jamie Doughty and Peter Dixon, Falmouth University

Scripted - *Pure* - Julia Johnson, Hannah Wakely, Charlotte Agnew, Justas Lapienė, Juri Choi and Grace Fortune, Falmouth University

Craft Skills: Production Design - *La Volpe* - Yergalem Caramini, Plymouth College of Art

RTS Futures

Sabrina Grant is having a busy year, presenting the new BBC Two craft series *Saved and Remade*, as well as working on her regular gig, the BBC One daily show *Morning Live*.

Grant, who made her name on Channel 4 consumer show *Supershoppers*, looked back at her early life and TV breakthrough at an RTS Futures event last month, in the company of ITV talent manager Lauren Evans, whom she first met as a fellow student at the Brit School.

Grant was brought up by her mother on a south London council estate and, from an early age, inspired by the likes of Zoe Ball, Cat Deeley and Davina McCall, wanted to be a TV presenter. "I loved what they were doing," she recalled. "I had a real love for presenting but I had no idea... how to get on the screen." And, she added, most presenters "didn't look like me".

Passing an audition for the Brit School moved Grant closer to her goal. She hosted a radio show, took media studies and then, post-16, studied musical theatre. "As a presenter, the more strings



Sabrina Grant

BBC

How to make it in presenting

you have to your bow, the more of an all-rounder you are," said Grant. "[With presenting] you're being genuine, but you're also putting

on a performance." A degree in acting from Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts followed, and then stage work and tours in school

productions, with bar and call-centre jobs to earn money. "I was doing anything just to make ends meet, but I started to get frustrated," she admitted.

Grant changed tack and landed a job in TV production, starting as a runner on *Britain's Got Talent*. "It was invaluable training – I learnt so much about what it takes to put a programme together," she said. She graduated to researching programmes, but "that was as far as I wanted to go because presenting was what I wanted to do".

Meeting presenter Anna Richardson gave her the opportunity to present and Grant grabbed it with both hands: "I was doing some styling for her and she suggested me to screen test for a role co-presenting *Supershoppers* with her on Channel 4." Two screen tests later, Grant got the job: "That was a massive turning point for me."

Offering advice to youngsters set on a career as a presenter, Grant pinpointed "resilience, patience, persistence and self-belief" as the key attributes needed.

Matthew Bell

Virtual press conferences are 'theatre'

RTS Isle of Man

The challenges of covering Covid-19 in a tight-knit community were put under the microscope last month at an RTS Isle of Man event "The new news, one year on".

Nine news outlets serve the island, and the RTS centre heard from a wide range of media across TV, print, radio and online about how their journalists had fared during the pandemic.

Much of the discussion focused on the regular online press conferences held by Government ministers and public health officials. To the chagrin of reporters, the format persisted even when health restrictions were lifted.

All agreed that digital encounters between journalists and officials were no substitute for physical contact, where there was more scope to interrogate the authorities.

Richard Butt, editor of Isle of Man Newspapers, dismissed the virtual press conferences as "theatre". "Politicians enjoy the profile... That's one of the main motivations behind them."

Isle of Man TV's Paul Moulton agreed: "They are so



NYTimes.com

controlling... We don't necessarily get answers out of the people [there]. It depends who's on the panel."

Manx Radio's news editor, Tim Glover, shared his colleagues' frustrations but said there was still scope for reporters to do their jobs.

He said: "Politicians give us the bare minimum of detail. It is up to us as journalists to interrogate their answers... That's where you get the real bombshells."

Social media had also made the journalists' jobs harder. Abuse from the public was common. "I get a lot of abuse along the lines of 'That's a stupid question to ask,' said Moulton. "I know I'm Marmite... It's tough, but you've got to live with it. It's not pleasant when you read something horrible about yourself."

Often, he said, the public failed to read the full story, preferring to comment based on the headline alone.

Steve Clarke

Salford enjoys a strong night

North West Centre

Dorothea Scarleta Sterian picked up two prizes at the North West Student Television Awards early this month.

The University of Salford student's film, *Staying Sane (During a Global Pandemic)* triumphed in both the Non-scripted and the Craft Skills: Camera categories.

University of Salford students scooped another two awards on the night: the Scripted prize for *In Vitro* and the Craft Skills: Editing award for *Look/Listen*.

UCEN Manchester Film School students won two Craft Skills awards, for Production Design (*Starting Now*) and Writing (*Forget Me Not*).

The Animation award went to Jamie Walsh's *Last Week* (University of Central Lancashire) and the Sound prize to a Manchester Metropolitan University team for *First Man*.

Granada Reports presenters Elaine Willcox and Gamal Fahnbulleh hosted the awards ceremony from their studio. "We've seen some wonderful work tonight and it's doubly impressive in light of the year we've all had," said Willcox. Fahnbulleh added: "Keep creating, devising and producing all of this phenomenal work and, no doubt, we will see you all working in this industry some time very soon."

Channel 4 News reporter Ayshah Tull, actor Julie Hesmondhalgh and BBC Breakfast hosts Dan Walker and Louise Minchin were just four of many TV figures who sent messages of support and tips to the student nominees.

Dock10 provided post-production support for the awards, which were produced by Rachel Pinkney.

Matthew Bell



Non-Scripted and Craft award winner
Dorothea Scarleta Sterian

Dorothea Scarleta Sterian

RTS North West Student Television Awards winners

Animation-Last Week-Jamie Walsh, University of Central Lancashire

Non-scripted-Staying Sane (During a Global Pandemic)-Dorothea Scarleta Sterian, University of Salford

Scripted-In Vitro-Mackenzie Thomson, Dylan Freeman, Liam Lyall and Alfie Gadsby Kane, University of Salford

Craft Skills: Camera-Staying Sane (During a Global Pandemic)

Dorothea Scarleta Sterian, University of Salford

Craft Skills: Editing-Look/Listen-Matt Hughes, University of Salford

Craft Skills: Production Design-Starting Now-Izzy Pye and Kitty Fish, UCEN Manchester Film School

Craft Skills: Sound-First Man-Jedd MacRae, Billy Varden and Geraint Thomas, Manchester Metropolitan University

Craft Skills: Writing-Forget Me Not-Simone Walsh, UCEN Manchester Film School



H makes the case for live viewing

Whoever said that crime doesn't pay? Not Jed Mercurio and BBC One. Congratulations to everyone involved in the sensational success of *Line of Duty*'s sixth season.

Almost 13 million viewers watched the Big Reveal of criminal mastermind H. You need to go back a long way to find an audience bigger than that sitting down to

enjoy a Sunday-night television drama.

To February 2001, to be exact, when an episode of ITV's *Heartbeat* was seen by 13.2 million people.

Now we know what binge-proof TV looks like.

Farewell, colourful socks and ties

Jon Snow has been synonymous with Channel 4 since he began presenting *Channel 4 News* back in 1989, when Margaret Thatcher was still Prime Minister.

His willingness to wear his heart on his sleeve, a trait then unusual among British

newscasters, has won him many fans. So, too, has his taste in colourful neck- and footwear. The nation's retailers of exciting ties and socks may never recover from his exit this December.

Allen goes in search of his own boffolas

Talking of departures, BBC comedy director Shane Allen's decision to leave the Beeb to head Boffola Pictures leaves a big gap to fill.

Allen joined the corporation in 2012 from Channel 4. His hits and award-winning commissions have included *Fleabag*, *Peter Kay's Car Share*,

This Country, *Inside No 9* and the 2019 *Gavin & Stacey* Christmas special.

Starstruck with modern romance

Normality may be beckoning, but we still need a regular fix of laughter. The brilliant new BBC Three and HBO Max comedy *Starstruck*, starring the hugely talented Rose Matafeo, is certain to tickle our funny bones.

Matafeo, winner of the 2018 Edinburgh Comedy Award, plays a London millennial juggling two dead-end jobs who accidentally sleeps with a movie star.



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