

November 2015

Television



Humans:
Anatomy of a hit

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From the CEO



Nowadays, it's hard to open a newspaper without coming across an article on how robots will own the future. Artificial intelligence has been at the top of the RTS's agenda during recent weeks. First up was a discussion with the team behind Channel 4's hit drama *Humans*, followed by the RTS/IET Joint Public Lecture, given by the peerless co-founder of DeepMind, Demis Hassabis.

At the *Humans* event – this month's cover story – we heard from cast members Gemma Chan and Tom

Goodman-Hill, executives from the Channel 4 commissioning team, two executive producers at Kudos, which made the series, and writers Jonathan Brackley and Sam Vincent.

I am grateful to all of them and to everyone else who made this event, the latest in our "Anatomy of a hit" strand, such a fabulous evening.

To say that Demis' talk was massively stimulating is an understatement. Thanks, too, to BBC Worldwide's Tim Davie for being such an exemplary chair and to all of you who attended this sold-out event.

Outside of London, the RTS has been making its presence felt. I was

thrilled to attend the first RTS Northern Ireland Programme Awards.

They were held at the brilliant Metropolitan Arts Centre in Belfast. John Sergeant was a wonderful MC and it was so great to have Christine Bleakley present as a special guest.

Meanwhile, don't forget that the RTS Craft & Design Awards 2014-2015 will be presented on Monday 30 November at the London Hilton, Park Lane.

Theresa Wise

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National events

RTS EARLY EVENING EVENT

Tuesday 24 November

The secret of soaps: the story behind the stories

Panellists: Stuart Blackburn, Producer, *Coronation Street*; Debbie Oates, writer; Tina O'Brien, actress (Sarah-Louise Platt in *Coronation Street*); John Whiston, Managing Director, Continuing Drama, ITV. Chair: Paul Jackson. 6:30pm for 6:45pm

Venue: One Great George Street, London SW1P 3AA

■ Book online at www.rts.org.uk

CONFERENCE

Monday 30 November

Who benefits? How can poverty be better portrayed on TV?

Organised jointly by the RTS, BBC, NCVO and Joseph Rowntree Foundation. 10:00am-4:00pm

Venue: Manchester Town Hall, Albert Sq, Manchester M60 2LA

■ Book online at www.rts.org.uk

RTS AWARDS

Monday 30 November

RTS Craft & Design Awards 2014-2015

Hosted by Susan Calman

Venue: The London Hilton, Park Lane, London W1K 1BE

■ Callum Stott 020 7822 2822
■ callum@rts.org.uk

RTS FUTURES

Tuesday 8 December

Christmas party

Celebration of Broadcast BAME Hotshots 2015. 6:30pm for 6:45pm

Venue: The Hospital Club, 24 Endell Street, London WC2H 9HQ

■ Book online at www.rts.org.uk

RTS EARLY EVENING EVENT

Thursday 4 February 2016

In conversation with... Gary Davey

Steve Hewlett interviews Gary Davey, Managing Director, Content, Sky UK. 6:30pm for 6:45pm

Venue: The Hospital Club, 24 Endell Street, London WC2H 9HQ

RTS AWARDS

Wednesday 17 February 2016

RTS Television Journalism Awards 2014-2015

The London Hilton, Park Lane, London W1K 1BE

RTS AWARDS

Thursday 3 March 2016

RTS Programme Awards 2015 nominations breakfast

Venue: The Hospital Club, 24 Endell Street, London WC2H 9HQ

JOINT PUBLIC LECTURE

Wednesday 11 May 2016

RTS/IET Joint Public Lecture with Sir Paul Nurse

Director of the Francis Crick Institute. 6:30pm for 7:00pm

Venue: British Museum, London WC1B 3DG

Local events

BRISTOL

Thursday 3 December

Christmas quiz

Hosted by Ellie Barker and Bob Crampton, ITV News West Country. 7:45pm

Venue: Bristol Folk House, 40A Park Street, Bristol BS1 5JG

Friday 4 March 2016

Annual Awards

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

■ Belinda Biggam
■ belindabiggam@hotmail.com

DEVON & CORNWALL

■ Kingsley Marshall

■ Kingsley.Marshall@falmouth.co.uk

EAST ANGLIA

■ Contact TBC

LONDON

Wednesday 2 December

The consumer tech conundrum

Venue: iBurba Studios, 3 Heathfield Terrace, London W4 4JE

Wednesday 9 December

Christmas Lecture:

Lorraine Heggessey

6:30pm for 7:00pm

Venue: Cavendish Conference

Centre, 22 Duchess Mews, London W1G 9DT

■ Daniel Cherowbrier
■ daniel@cherowbrier.co.uk

MIDLANDS

Wednesday 9 December

New directions in immersive entertainment

Presentation by Dr Nicholas Lodge. 6:30pm for 7:00pm
Venue: IET, Kingston Theatre, Birmingham B1 2NP

■ Jayne Greene 07792 776585
■ jayne@ijmmedia.co.uk

NORTH EAST & THE BORDER

Wednesday 25 November

Networking evenings

The last Wednesday of the month, for anyone working in TV, film, computer games or digital production. 6:00pm onwards.

Venue: Tyneside Bar Café, Tyneside Cinema, 10 Pilgrim St, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 6QG

Friday 11 December

Review of the Year

7:00pm
Venue: Live Theatre, Broad Chare, Quayside, Newcastle Upon Tyne NE1 3DQ

Saturday 27 February 2016

Annual Awards/Student Awards

Venue: Newcastle Gateshead Hilton NE8 2AR

■ Jill Graham
■ jill.graham@blueyonder.co.uk

NORTH WEST

Thursday 11 February 2016

Student Awards conference and presentation

Venue: Salford University/Compass Rooms, Lowry Theatre, Pier 8, Salford Quays M50 3AZ

■ Rachel Pinkney 07966 230639
■ rachelpinkney@yahoo.co.uk

NORTHERN IRELAND

■ John Mitchell

■ mitch.mvbroadcast@btinternet.com

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

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

SCOTLAND

■ James Wilson 07899 761167
■ james.wilson@cityofglasgow-college.ac.uk

SOUTHERN

Friday 4 March 2016

Annual Awards/Student Awards

Venue: TBC

■ Gordon Cooper
■ gordonjcooper@gmail.com

THAMES VALLEY

Friday 27 November

25th Anniversary Dinner Dance

Venue: Beaumont House Hotel, Burfield Rd, Old Windsor SL4 2JJ

Wednesday 9 December

Gopro and small camera systems

6:30pm for 7:00pm
Venue: Pincents Manor, Calcot, Reading RG31 4UQ

■ Penny Westlake
■ info@rtstvc.org.uk

WALES

Friday 20 November

ITV Wales through the decades

A look through the archives with David Lloyd

Venue: Aberystwyth Screen and Sound Archive, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion SY23 3BU

Friday 27 November

Christmas quiz

Presenter: Daniel Glyn
Venue: Jongleurs Club, Greyfriars Rd, Cardiff CF10 3DP

■ Hywel William 07980 007841
■ hywel@aim.uk.com

YORKSHIRE

Sunday 22 November

Student Television Awards

Venue: York Racecourse

Thursday 10 December

Christmas quiz

7:30pm
Venue: Trinity Arts Centre, Boar Lane, Leeds LS1 6HW

Monday 25 January 2016

AGM

Venue: Leeds Trinity University, Leeds LS18 5HD

■ Lisa Holdsworth 07790 145280
■ lisa@allonewordproductions.co.uk

TV diary

Lorraine Heggessey enjoys an unusual sing out from choirmaster Gareth Malone and meets some inspirational women



Off to The Club at The Ivy for Sue Perkins's book launch of *Spectacles*. It turns out that Sue had a penchant for kilts as a child. Who knew? The room is full of talented, inspirational women. I'm thrilled to meet the legend that is Mary Berry, though she, Mel and Sue remain professionally tight-lipped about who is going to win *Bake Off*. I'm rooting for Nadiya.

■ Next day it's back to The Ivy for a meeting with choirmaster Gareth Malone and Jane Callaghan, the wonderful MD of The Grierson Trust. Gareth has kindly agreed to host the Grierson Awards for us this year and I suggest that he gets everyone singing at the start of the ceremony. He's up for this, although I wonder later whether our audience of documentary-makers and television executives will be as keen.

■ It's a good month for the Head of the Channel 4 Growth Fund, Laura Franes, who has secured a deal to back Sacha Baron Cohen and Andrew Newman's new company. The duo will be working with new talent as they develop comedy shows.

Whether you're well established or fresh out of college, starting a new company is challenging. I meet up with Renowned Films, the youngest

team backed by the Fund, who are celebrating their first broadcast commissions.

■ *Bake Off* winner is Nadiya! Hooray! She's hailed as a great role model for Muslim women, but I love the fact that she says on *Woman's Hour* that she represents "stay-at-home mums" and what they can achieve.

■ At a gala screening of *Suffragette*, it's heartening to see a line of women on stage for the Q&A. Meryl Streep says she modelled her performance of Emmeline Pankhurst on a few seconds of silent film. She then proceeds to wow the audience with an impromptu imitation of the footage.

Hats off to producers Alison Owen and Faye Ward, along with director Sarah Gavron and writer Abi Morgan for their persistence. It took 11 years to get the film off the ground. Surely, nothing to do with the fact that it's about women?

■ It's good to see the way that on- and off-screen creative talent work across TV and film in the UK. A few days later, I'm gripped by new BBC One drama *River*, written by none other than Abi Morgan. It's as close to Scandi-noir as I've seen on British TV.

■ Endemol Shine CEO Sophie Turner Laing is guest speaker at Neil Smith's "Presidents' Lunch". She says it's only Brits and Americans that

have the "not invented here" syndrome. She also has the courage to dismiss the idea of the 100-day plan, as it wouldn't have given her enough time to get to know such a geographically diverse company.

■ The night of the Griersons – the 43rd British Documentary Awards – has arrived. Much to my relief, the audience *does* sing – eventually. Gareth has picked the perfect anthem for the documentary community: John Farnham's *You're the Voice*.

It's a huge relief to see more women on shortlists and winning awards this year – and to see them take the microphone, unlike last year, when even the indomitable Norma Percy didn't make an acceptance speech.

In a great moment, director Bruce Goodison defers to his producer Susan Horth, who speaks passionately about *Our World War: The First Day*. Trailblazer Kim Longinotto, who has spent her career giving exploited women a voice in some stunning films, is given the prestigious Trustees' Award.

Altogether now:

*You're the voice, try and understand it
Make a noise and make it clear
Oh-wo-wo-wo, oh-wo-wo-wo
We're not gonna sit in silence
We're not gonna live with fear*

Lorraine Heggessey is Chair of The Grierson Trust and Independent Advisor to Channel 4's Growth Fund.



Channel 4

The human factor

It seems that every successful television show needs a degree of serendipity. As we discovered during the latest RTS “Anatomy of a hit” session, Channel 4’s surprise summer hit, *Humans*, was no exception.

The British producer, Kudos, famous for *Spooks*, *Life on Mars* and *Broadchurch*, got lucky when it got into bed with AMC, the US cable channel equally famous for *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*.

Kudos got luckier still when it cast Gemma Chan as the implausibly pretty synth, Anita/Mia, purchased to restore equilibrium to the Hawkins household, but whose arrival only adds to the domestic dysfunction.

Based on the award-winning Swedish drama, *Real Humans*, executives at Kudos explained to the RTS audience how the show, Channel 4’s most popular drama for 20 years, reached the screen.

A three-minute teaser was enough to start pulses racing at Kudos, recalled *Humans* Executive Producer, Derek Wax. “It was so original that we decided we wanted to option it,” he said. “We swooped and did a deal with Matador [the Swedish producer].”

“We went to Sweden and talked to them about how they had made the show. We took their original idea and then Jon and Sam [writers Jonathan Brackley and Sam Vincent, who’d

Content

The stars, writers and producers of *Humans* explain how the hit drama was nurtured for the small screen. **Steve Clarke** takes notes

worked on *Spooks*] created different story strands and a different psychological dimension within those characters and the story. I think that’s what made it an original show.”

He added: “It probably took eight to nine months between seeing the original tape and Channel 4 commissioning *Humans*...”

“We wanted to take the original show to a different level. I am not saying our show is better than theirs, it is just a different show because we felt there was more to explore in the family dynamic.”

For Brackley and Vincent, used to writing taut, exciting scripts for *Spooks*, it was important to ground the show in humdrum reality, regardless of the fantasy element.

The audience was played a clip from *Humans*’s opening episode, in which Joe

Hawkins [played by Tom Goodman-Hill] takes daughter Sophie to the store that sells synths, where he is first introduced to android Anita and her robotic charms.

“It was important to get the balance between the eerie, unsettling side of it and the banality, the everydayness, of it,” explained Vincent.

“That is why the salesman’s dialogue is very colloquial. We were thinking about the Apple Store. It is a very sleek, modern place but what goes on there is actually very everyday.”

“You don’t want to overplay the spookiness. You want it to feel real... It was important for us to get that right and to feel that it was just a family purchasing a piece of very hi-tech consumer technology.”

This determination to anchor *Humans* in today’s world and reflect contemporary concerns was one reason for its extraordinary success, the panellists suggested.

“That’s probably the key to the show’s popularity. It charmed the viewers. It is a very domestic way in to what could be seen as a science-fiction show,” said Brackley.

“It is a science-fiction show, but the balance between the domestic aspect and seeing how the family deal with their new technology brought in a broader and wider audience.”

Channel 4’s Deputy Head of Drama, Beth Willis, agreed. She highlighted the

From left: Beth Willis, Simon Maxwell, Chris Fry, Derek Wax, Tom Goodman-Hill, Gemma Chan, Sam Vincent, Jonathan Brackley and Stephen Armstrong

Humans: Anatomy of a hit



Paul Hampartsourmian

character of working mother Laura Hawkins, a lawyer juggling the demands of bringing up three children, domestic chores and life at the office.

Willis said: “The key thing for us was that, at the heart of it, it was about life, about motherhood and being a family.

“Laura tries to look after her family and keep it together.... It speaks to what every working mother feels, which is her perpetual guilt and terror that they are not doing anything good enough.

“Despite the fact that it was very sci-fi, it felt very human to me.... If I had to guess why it worked, it would be the central guilt and worry that we all feel about family and work and home.”

Finding the right co-producer for a high-profile TV drama is rarely straightforward. Originally, Xbox was to partner on *Humans*, but when, in the summer of 2014, the company announced that it was closing its fledgling entertainment studio, Kudos was left with a problem.

Wax took up the story: “We suddenly had to find a new partner. We talked to quite a number of potential co-producers. AMC was the one most attuned to the show that we wanted to make. In co-production, it is all about being on the same page.

“We did speak to people, who I won’t name, who wanted to make it more American....

“They said: ‘Could they call the mum, Mom?’ And they said, ‘It’s fine setting it

YOU DON’T WANT TO OVERPLAY THE SPOOKINESS. YOU WANT IT TO FEEL REAL

in Gerrards Cross but where, exactly, is Gerrards Cross?’ They wanted to include American slang, such as ‘ass-hole’. There was no way that we could make a hybrid show in which British characters spoke American slang.”

Chris Fry, another executive producer on *Humans*, praised AMC’s contribution to the series: “It was supportive and productive on notes and on the edit.”

“AMC embraced the fact that it’s a British show,” Wax stressed. “It wanted us to cast an American actor, but we wanted to cast an American actor, too. It made perfect sense that George [played by William Hurt] was American.”

Channel 4’s Head of International Drama, Simon Maxwell, said it had helped that, by the time new US production partners were being sought, Kudos and the broadcaster “had a really solid idea of what the show was. We had two great scripts – the first two episodes – and a bible of the rest of the show.

“AMC knew exactly what it was buying into.... It was a very close

relationship with AMC. I don’t think we disagreed on anything. There was real editorial synergy.”

Regarding the key question of casting this ambitious drama, Kudos executives said that they had a tailwind behind them. “It came together like a dream, is the short answer,” noted Fry. “It was all based on the script.

“Every cast member who came in to audition said that these are the best and most interesting scripts we’ve ever read. Most actors probably say that [laughter from the audience], but I thought it was genuine... ”

“Gemma [Chan] was probably one of the first people in on the day we started casting.... She just sort of was Anita. (See box on page 8, for what it’s like to play a synth.)

“I remember, after she’d done her first reading, we all sat there and none of us could think of a note. Tom, again, came in and nailed it straight away.”

Hurt, an artificial intelligence nut from boyhood, came to the show via AMC. As for the casting of the other main characters, Kudos’s US collaborator was happy to keep the star quotient low.

Wax pointed out that both Jon Hamm in *Mad Men* and Bryan Cranston in *Breaking Bad* were not Hollywood A-listers before landing these parts. He added: “It’s all about the quality of the acting. AMC wanted truthful actors and people who were right for the role.” >

The challenge of playing a robot...



Gemma Chan as Anita

Paul Hampartsoumian

Gemma Chan: 'I want to thank choreographer Dan O'Neill.... He was with us before we started filming to help us with the movement work.

'The production team were clear that they didn't want anything overtly robotic. Regarding the synth movement, they didn't want any head cocking, but they did want something that was other than human.

'Dan took it back to basics and said: "There has to be efficiency and economy to every movement because every movement uses up battery power."

'Everything had to be relearnt, from

how to stand up and sit down to how to pick up a glass. The simplest things became very.... On the first day of filming, I got home and I felt my head was going to explode. Having to try and remember all the technical stuff and how many steps it was to the door, as well as trying to act in the scenes, was really, really hard.

'I felt really jealous of the humans.... On the plus side, what you do discover as an actor is the power that you have in stillness and in not giving everything away. You have to find a different way to express emotions.'

... and playing opposite a robot



Tom Goodman-Hill and Gemma Chan

Paul Hampartsoumian

Tom Goodman-Hill: 'It was incredibly weird, especially in the early episodes, when Gemma was ostensibly playing Anita....

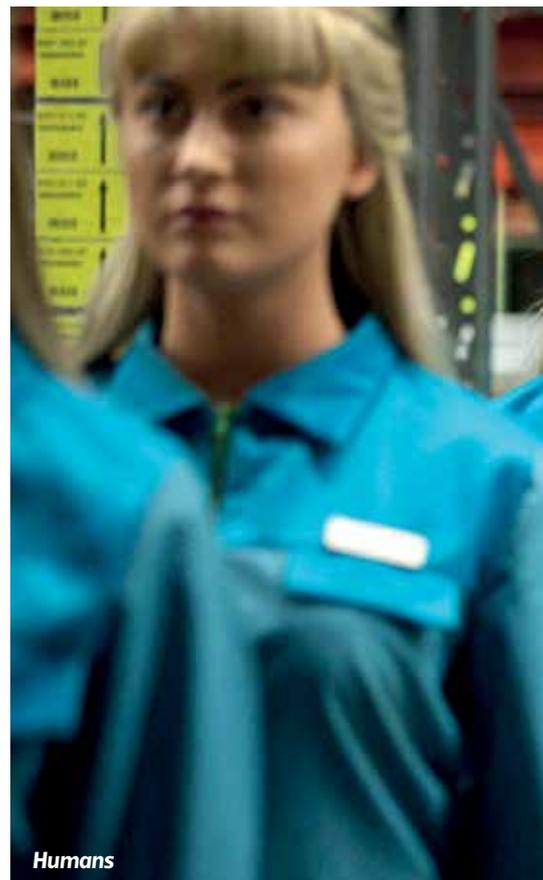
'It's really unsettling, particularly in episodes three and four: Joe is reflected back on himself and trying to find out what Laura finds so fascinating about her and trying to find out what he finds so unsettling about her.

'What Gemma's really doing, which is extremely unnerving, is reflecting you back at yourself for a lot of the time.

'Every now and again, she lets out something that is slightly quizzical or slightly human. *That* was then very unsettling...

'As a family, the first big scene we did with Anita was the scene around the breakfast table.

'We were completely freaked out because Gemma was furiously concentrating on making sure she was staying in Anita mode. It was weird because Gemma was slightly detached from us... it was really strange.'



Humans

› "From the co-production point of view, casting is one of the key areas where you can have disagreements," said Maxwell. "It was an example of how smooth the entire process was... there wasn't one major casting disagreement."

"We had an amazing cast," Fry emphasised. "Not just the synths, but the incredibly emotional performances from Tom and Gemma. Throughout the series, I wanted it to feel real and truthful and not too big and heightened for the whole thing to work."

Willis drew attention to the performance of Katherine Parkinson as Laura Hawkins, known to Channel 4 audiences for her part in *The IT Crowd*.

"For the channel, it's important that the cast felt real and not too showy," she said. "Katherine felt so natural and so real. I am so glad we had her."

Throughout the RTS discussion, the panellists highlighted how *Humans'* subject matter engaged with contemporary issues – the litmus test, perhaps, of all decent science fiction, be it Kurt Vonnegut or *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Centre stage was the role "intelligent" machines have in most of our lives and how they might eventually control us.

"At what point do our own creations start making us obsolete," asked



Channel 4

Maxwell. “We all invite technological gadgets into our lives, but at what cost?”

“That is one of the reasons why the show proved so successful. There is fear in our relationship with technology. Because we fear it might make us obsolete, but we can’t be made obsolete because of our humanity and our capacity for love.”

For a series that captured millions of people’s imaginations, the drama was at its best when it was “complex and ambiguous and not too binary”, reckoned Wax. “It raised lots of ethical dilemmas and grey areas. We saw synths being abused in brothels... and welcomed into homes to make our lives easier and give us quality time. We saw the huge anger some people felt about them.”

The synths’ servility raised questions about social hierarchies. “All the way through, there are analogies to slavery. It never articulates that, but it’s the subtext of the whole series,” said Wax.

“When we have a pliant person who we own, we could do anything to them and, if we do, does that degrade our own humanity?... The whole notion of understanding the humanity of people who are in a service profession, *Humans* resonates with that.”

Chan added: “There are people

IF I HAD TO GUESS WHY IT WORKED, IT WOULD BE THE CENTRAL GUILT AND WORRY THAT WE ALL FEEL ABOUT FAMILY AND WORK AND HOME

in society who we treat as less than human. If you feel you can get away with it or you’re in a position where they can’t even talk back... should you behave that way? That was what was interesting.”

Anita’s place in the Hawkins home sets off an identity crisis in Joe. “He’s trying to be a new male and failing. He thinks a synth is going to solve the problems and allow him to reconnect with his wife,” said Tom Goodman-Hill.

“The opposite is the case and, because of this, Joe falls apart. That is at the heart of the kind of gender conversations that are happening now.”

Chan raised the question of whether it is possible to program gender into a

robot. “The robot’s sense of gender comes from the way it experiences the world and how other people react to it. That gets reinforced [in the Hawkins home],” she said.

Work has already begun on a second season, due to air next year. The writers said that the aim was to notch the storylines up a gear. “You can expect most of the cast to return,” promised Vincent. “In terms of tone, we want to go deeper into the relationships between humans and synths – sexual, romantic love, platonic love.

“It is such a rich area. We want to find new ways to get new relationships, be it with new characters or new combinations of characters.

“We’re going to move the world on a little bit, the canvas is a little broader. Some time has passed, allowing the ordinary synths to integrate that bit further and become more sophisticated and more involved in the fabric of our lives.”

‘Humans: anatomy of a hit’ was an RTS event held at King’s Place, London, on 27 October. It was produced by Elena Kemp, PR Manager, Drama and Acquisitions, Channel 4, Jamie O’Neill, RTS Events Co-ordinator, and Alex Wells, Senior Communications Manager, Endemol Shine Group.

Is Channel 4 for sale?

The Government rules nothing out as the network's future exercises minds in Whitehall and Hollywood.

Maggie Brown goes behind the scenes



When Ofcom holds its final board meeting of 2015 in December, it will have a list of the candidates competing to be the next Chair of Channel 4. At the top of the list will be Mark Price, outgoing Chief Executive of Waitrose and Deputy Chair of John Lewis.

The advert for the post – a hugely sensitive one, as the Government explores the possibility of selling off Channel 4 – was hurried out on 10 October by favoured headhunter Dom Loehnis of Egon Zehnder, with a closing date of 16 November.

A key requirement for the job was: “having regard to the debate around the future of the channel and of public service broadcasting’s contribution to the creative industries”.

One worldly observer says: “The exam question to pass is, ‘Do you support a for-profit Channel 4 model?’” This is seen as the key to the broadcaster being realistically valued.

The appointment will be of acute interest to US media companies circling UK media assets. Claire Enders, Chief Executive of Enders Analysis, confirms: “We have been approached by banks seeking to understand what changes can be made to have a more attractive remit for Channel 4.”

On 4 November, at Prime Minister’s Questions, David Cameron admitted that “all the options” were being considered for Channel 4, fuelling concerns that a sale is being discussed at Cabinet level.

This came after the SNP’s culture spokesman, John Nicolson, a former BBC and ITV news journalist, now the MP for East Dunbartonshire, asked: “Can the Prime Minister confirm... that no discussions are under way to privatise and imperil this much-loved and important public institution?”

Cameron replied: “I want to make sure that Channel 4 has a strong and secure future and I think it is right to look at all the options, including to see whether private investment into Channel 4 could help safeguard it for the future. Let’s have a look at all the options, not close our minds like some on the Opposition front bench, who think private is bad and public is good.”

The backdrop to selecting a successor to Lord Burns as Channel 4 Chair is the shock that the channel – and the entire UK broadcasting sector – received in

late September. An official on his way into Downing Street was snapped holding a document, headed "Assessment of Channel 4 Corporation reform options", by a vigilant press photographer.

The document was written by a senior DCMS figure and made clear that, behind the scenes, Secretary of State John Whittingdale and Cabinet Office minister Matt Hancock had started work to explore selling Channel 4 to the private sector.

The photographed document noted the agreement that "work should proceed to examine the options for extracting greater financial value from the Channel 4 Corporation, focusing on privatisation options in particular, while protecting its ability to deliver against its remit".

It confirmed that the Shareholder Executive, the body that holds state assets under the wing of the Treasury, would seek permission to access the accounts of Channel 4 to "enable more meaningful options analysis". To be fair, the options include doing nothing.

On that list is Burns's proposal that Channel 4 should be converted from a statutory corporation into a not-for-profit, public-service trust. Under this model, stakeholders, including the independent sector, would guarantee its special remit.

The not-for-profit company shares would be held by a revolving body of 20-50 members, drawn from staff, viewers and other stakeholders.

Channel 4's Board "put through" the option devised by Burns after May's general election. A paper was personally handed to Whittingdale by Burns in early September.

One Conservative peer, however, believes the "not-for-profit" option is simply not a runner: "It is a political ploy to keep the Government away and it is a big mistake. It takes the competitive tension away, encourages slackness, the public sector pumping money into something for no return."

Enders adds: "I don't know why they did it, it had no positive impact. It was laughable."

A source close to the situation adds: "The Treasury gets nothing. It is not going to happen." Nevertheless, it will be considered as an option, as part of the DCMS review.

The unintended disclosure of options for altering Channel 4's status is considered a cock-up by all concerned, including the DCMS. Enders says: "[The Chancellor] doesn't want the

whole creative economy jumping up and down. It is a profound embarrassment to the Government." It gave the impression that preparations for a potentially radical change to Channel 4, created by Margaret Thatcher's first Government, were under way. And all without parliamentary debate.

This point was taken up by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, which grilled Burns and Channel 4 CEO David Abraham last month.

Revealing that a fundamental review of Channel 4's status is high on the Government's broadcasting agenda also blew Whittingdale's cover.

At the Edinburgh International Television Festival in August, he sought to reassure delegates that privatisation "is not on our agenda". But he also added that Channel 4's remit "has nothing to do with ownership".

The context is that a Conservative House of Commons majority has given Chancellor George Osborne carte blanche to return to his original plans for broadcasting, formulated before May 2010, when the Tories were forced to form a coalition with the Lib Dems.

The Government is aware, however, that Channel 4 has wide, cross-party support and that any change to its statutory position might be difficult to get through the House of Lords.

Enders sees the Chancellor's "imperial fist coming to smash through public service broadcasting". Osborne has already created another big hole in the BBC's finances; it has to take responsibility for covering the cost of free TV licences for the over-75s, a demand blocked in 2010 by the Lib Dems.

Ofcom has received a second, and connected, demand from Whittingdale: to revisit the terms of trade, the code governing the supply deal between qualifying independent producers and public service broadcasters (see box on page 12). If revised, this could make Channel 4 more attractive to potential bidders, especially if the broadcaster is allowed to own valuable rights currently in the hands of producers.

But this move has cost Channel 4 the wholehearted support of the producers' organisation, Pact, which reckons that the broadcaster's complaints about big independents being too powerful stimulated this review.

Enders, moreover, believes that this latest examination of the terms of trade is part of a long-term attempt to dismantle preferential treatment for independents – a preference ascribed to >

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THE PROBLEM IS THAT CHANNEL 4 ISN'T DOING ENOUGH PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE



Mark Price, Acting Chair of Channel 4, and likely to succeed Lord Burns as Chair

Waitrose

► both Osborne and Sajid Javid, the former media minister, now Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills.

Pact CEO John McVay is withering about Channel 4: “The attack on its suppliers has been relentless. It is reaping a bit of what it has sown.”

He is infuriated by any suggestion that benefits to larger independents should be curtailed: “Why try and act like a nanny? The degree of Victorian hubris is gobsmacking.”

The independent sector heard about the not-for-profit-trust proposal only after Burns went public. “The whole Channel 4 approach is incoherent,” fumes McVay.

Alex Graham, whose Wall to Wall company grew into a leading independent and is now owned by Warner Bros, sees “privatisation as a solution to a problem that doesn’t exist. No one has explained why it would be a good thing for viewers or broadcasting.”

Former Channel 4 CEO Michael Jackson says: “What matters, perforce, is a different remit and purpose. It wouldn’t be the same [after privatisation]. The demands of shareholders would bring a certain scepticism to it.”

Another leading TV executive argues: “The problem is that Channel 4 isn’t doing enough public service broadcasting to make a difference. There isn’t the passion for it.”

But Ron Jones, Executive Chair of Tinopolis, one of the largest independents, takes a more nuanced view: “Don’t we live in uncertain times? So many good things could be damaged. I am not, in principle, opposed to a sale as long as it is seen in a broader context, safeguarding the public purposes of broadcasting across the UK.

“A modern market economy is a balance between an entrepreneurial, piratical approach and what the public will tolerate. But, in this case, not getting it right affects how society works. It is that serious.”

Jones adds: “I’d hate to see a discussion on ownership [of Channel 4] take us away from its public-service remit. That is the biggest threat. If they do sell Channel 4, then the public purpose and reinforcement of that PSB element is most important and is desperately needed.”

One of his worries is that Channel 4, “owned by an overseas broadcaster, would be a dumping ground for its product”. (See page 25 for Jones’s views on PSB.)

Meanwhile, Jackson’s advice to the channel is pragmatic: “Copy the BBC. Stress what more you can do as a PSB and make a creative argument.”

Why the terms of trade are under review – again

Culture secretary John Whittingdale ordered Ofcom in September to undertake a fresh review of the 2003 agreement. He sees the terms of trade as a key determinant of the shape of public service broadcasting, together with the BBC Charter and licence-fee settlement, Channel 4’s future, and the effects of rapid consolidation and ownership changes.

Channel 4 is arguing for adjustments, not abolition or wholesale change, to make the terms ‘fit for purpose’. The broadcaster does not want a one-size-fits-all model. This opens up the possibility of different terms for the BBC and Channel 4.

‘Can we have a fairer deal, a reset’ [to help sustain Channel 4 in future], asked CEO David Abraham, when he appeared before the Culture, Media and Sport Committee in October.

He pointed out that an independent’s IP was acquired when that producer was bought by a foreign company. Although new deals might not benefit from the terms of trade, all of the producer’s back catalogue and rights were covered in perpetuity.

Some variation was needed to support smaller companies, as was a clearer delineation of non-qualifying production companies, he argued.

The broadcaster suggests a cut-off point should be reached when an independent’s annual turnover reached £50m or £100m, say.

‘The last thing we want to do is anything that weakens the [independent] sector,’ Abraham said.

The DCMS has been surprised at the vehement reaction of the independent sector to its decision to review the terms of trade.



Public domain

The content guru

Let us start the Tim Hincks story in the summer of 2000, and in a lavatory in Bedford Square. We are deep in the bowels, as it were, of Peter Bazalgette's Bazal Productions and the overnight ratings for *Flatmates* have just come through. It is a reality game show, inspired by the flatmate interview scene in *Shallow Grave*, and it has been invented by Hincks, who is still a tender 32.

"It's a tragic story," says Hincks, sitting in his office at Endemol Shine where, now aged 48, he is President. "I was incredibly excited. And I remember being at the team drinks as we screened it, or we watched the first episode go out live on Channel 4.

"Everyone was in an incredibly good mood but I remember watching it and thinking, 'Fuck! It's been cut too fast. I'm not sure I'm taking this in.'"

The next morning, the overnights revealed that a healthy 2.1 million had watched. The next week, that figure nudged up a little. Hincks's fears were obviously misplaced. But the week after, the figure was 1.7 million.

"The following week, it was down to 1.3 million and it had gone – I

The Billen Profile

Tim Hincks oversees so many shows that he cannot name them all. But in 2000, aged 32, he thought his TV career was already over, discovers **Andrew Billen**

actually went and locked myself in the lavatory. I just sat there for an hour. It felt like the end. What was I going to do?"

What he did was bounce back with *Bar Wars* (2001) and *Shattered* (2004). He followed Bazalgette to Endemol and became Chief Creative Officer and then Chief Executive Officer. As President, now, he has ultimate oversight over so many shows across Endemol divisions across the world that he cannot name them all.

His company takes up several floors of an office block south of

Shepherd's Bush in London. In the fifth-floor lobby where I wait, young men in 50ls tell their professional suitors: "Let's grab lunch".

Hincks is tieless in an expensive-looking suit jacket and jeans. Even in this age of professionalisation and globalisation, even here in Britain's second-biggest super-indie (after All3Media), television production is, he says, still a cottage industry run on ideas, long hours and heartbreak.

Hincks's enthusiasm for his trade is leavened by a witty cynicism, showcased this June in his Bafta Television Lecture, an address that, for laughs, ran Armando Iannucci's *MacTaggart* close.

Initially, as we talk, I find it hard to mesh this agreeable storyteller with the tough-minded negotiator of industry repute. When, in 2006, ITV tried to steal two of Endemol's biggest hits (*Big Brother* and *Deal or No Deal*) from Channel 4, Hincks managed, it is said, to prise another £30m from Channel 4. He says these sums are confidential, but seems pleased to be reminded of the coup.

"I feel we should be partners with broadcasters. We make all sorts of shows with Channel 4 and it is an ▶

› incredibly important client for us and as a platform. But I think, when you have a hit show, it's rude not to get a fair price for it. It would be remiss."

In 2010, Channel 4 dropped *Big Brother*. Undeterred, Hincks negotiated its sale to Channel 5. Its new owner, Richard Desmond, was the show's "biggest fan" but also determined not to pay a penny more than he needed to. Rumour has it that, at one point, Desmond smashed a glass at Hincks's feet.

"I don't think that I've ever said whether it's true or not. So, why break the habit of a lifetime?"

Oh, go on, break it, I say.

"My view on Richard," he continues, "was that he really cared about what he did and that I cared about what I did. As long as I kept reminding myself of that, it was going to be fine. He's also funny. He's very serious about what he does, but doesn't want people to take themselves too seriously."

So what kind of glass did he smash?

"It's hard to remember. Richard would have to tell you. I believe it was a water glass. It was only lunchtime, after all."

And there is no conflict between looking tough in that kind of negotiation and his sensitive, creative inner self?

"Oh, I see what you mean. I don't know that I would ever describe myself as a hard man in negotiations. Although I enjoy them, I think it's a big mistake – and some companies make it – to separate creative from commercial. I think that can cause problems. There is nothing else but content in companies like this. Why separate the two?"

The other part of his job is to be one of television's most powerful impresarios. It divides across two territories. The first is scripted, the industry's current "favourite child", where Endemol Shine's portfolio of recent hits is impressive: *Broadchurch*, *Peaky Blinders*, *The Fall*, *Humans*, *Grantchester*.

Many of these are Endemol's only by inheritance, following its merger with Shine last year (Shine had owned *Broadchurch*-maker Kudos since 2007).

"The scripted story for us at Endemol," concedes Hincks, "really kicked off with two things, Tiger Aspect, which joined us in 2010, and Charlie Brooker, who had worked with us for some time and then came up with *Black Mirror*."

He has, he says, learnt to read scripts, taking them home and attending read-throughs. A drama, however, is high cost and, therefore, high risk. The UK



boasts a relatively small market of buyers, although with Sky, Netflix and Amazon, it is an expanding one.

Drama format sales abroad have a poor track record (look at *Broadchurch*), although foreign sales of the shows themselves help to recoup investment.

"But we don't think about how things are going to be paid for at the beginning. The creative process begins by asking: 'What's the passion project we're interested in?' And then: 'How can I help people get it made?'"

"That is really, really, important because, if you don't do that, you start to think you're in the business of not just looking for a hit but looking for a hit that pays for itself. You might as well play the lottery."

On non-scripted, Hincks believes that, with *Big Brother*, Endemol owns the "Platonic ideal" of a reality show. It is likely to be "a feature of British TV as long as it's meaningful to talk about it".

That is the good news. And the bad? "In unscripted, it's hard to launch shows these days. Everyone is saying it's cyclical and I believe, in a year or so, that there will be a breakthrough. The model is still incredibly resilient."

In both halves of television entertainment, real and made-up, there lurks, Hincks believes, a deficit of

creative input from the non-graduate, non-public-school-educated majority: the viewing classes.

At his Bafta lecture, he announced that, for every work-experience opportunity granted to an executive's friend's offspring, Endemol Shine would give another to an unconnected applicant who would be paid the London living wage.

"Our tendency is to make television about and by people who come from a certain section of society, right? And that's very powerful for those people involved and it's self-perpetuating. But you want more people to watch. With *The Inbetweeners* and *Grange Hill*, I felt these programmes spoke to me."

Because he went to a comprehensive?

"Yes. Because they were comprehensive schools, I recognised them and the characters, as did millions."

He liked *Benefits Street*. "But if the charge is that the show was made by rich people about poor people, it's true; it's unequivocally true."

There are those who have found Hincks's self-appointment as "tribune of the people" a little hard to take, given both his actual background in, as he told Bafta, "the badlands of West Sussex" and the fact, which he also acknowledged, that he sends his



children to public school. His parents were lower-middle, not working, class. His mother was a school teacher and his father a civil servant – by rumour, a spy (“I never worked it out: what were those trips to Moscow all about?”).

Neither went to university, however, and his mother’s mother had worked as a “skivvy” in a big house in Norfolk.

Even if they had been rich, they would have had an ideological objection to paying for Tim’s education.

At Bristol University, he thought of himself as left-wing and, although it was the height of Thatcherism, never contemplated a career in, say, banking.

Is he still left-wing?

“I think that would be quite a trick to pull off as my kids go to private school and I work for a big media company. I am not sure what that means any more. I vote Labour.”

After Bristol, he became a researcher at the National Consumer Council, but wrote to television producers whose names appeared at the bottom of listings in *Radio Times*. He messed up an interview for *That’s Life!* but was hired by Bazalgette to research a book for him, *The Food Revolution*.

“He said: ‘If this goes well, you can come on [Bazal’s] the *Food and Drink* programme.’ That was the most exotic

promise that I had ever been made.” It did go well. From there, he worked at Wall to Wall and at *Newsnight*, but continued to come back to Bazalgette and thence to Endemol when it absorbed Bazal.

Along the way – around about the time we met the young Tim in his loo – he married the photographer Pippa Healy. She was then working at Wall to Wall, although he did not meet her there but at a party he had resolved not to go to until he realised he was outside the house where it was being thrown. She came up to him to get away from someone else.

“There’s an amazing Pulp song that describes our meeting, called *Something Changed*. I can’t exactly remember the line but, basically, it goes: ‘Why did I come to this place at this time? If I hadn’t, would I now be with someone else?’”

It has been a happy marriage. “Three kids. We have a lovely time.”

After 15, apparently equally happy, years at Endemol, perhaps it is time for a change? Although he is President (“a trick of the light”) and she is merely CEO, he reports to Sophie Turner Laing, late of Sky. The relationship is, he claims, “very easy”: “It is a big company. There’s plenty for us both to do.

“It has been 15 years, but I really believe no year has been the same as the other. We’ve grown. We’ve gone from making *Changing Rooms* and *Ready Steady Cook* to *Big Brother*, into this whole reality boom and then into scripted, making *Ripper Street*, and *Charlie Brooker’s Screenwipe*. My feeling has been: if you’re top of the premiership, why would you go to another team?”

It sounds enviable. Does he never lie awake at night worrying?

“I’d love to say I don’t, but in a business where no one knows anything, there are moments when I get anxious, moments when I feel that something might be slipping away or something isn’t going as well as you want it to, and that’s kind of personal. That can hurt.”

I wonder if he ever compares his younger employees, the ambitious lunch-grabbers, with his own younger self, crushed with self-doubt in Bazalgette’s loo?

“I do, definitely, and I don’t know whether that makes me a good boss or not. What would I say to that person? It is a hackneyed question but I’m going to answer it anyway. I think I would say: ‘It’s going to be all right, but you’re right to feel the pain.’”

Tim of his life



Tim Hincks, President, Endemol Shine Group

Married To Pippa Healy, photographer; two sons, one daughter

Lives Richmond, Surrey

Born Windsor, 18 August 1967

Father David Hincks, civil servant

Mother Geraldine Hincks, teacher

Brought up Billingshurst, West Sussex

Education Weald Comprehensive; Bristol University (economics and politics)

First job Hair-gel factory, Billingshurst

1990 Researcher, National Consumer Council

1990 Researcher, BBC and Bazal, working on *Food and Drink* and *Newsnight* and for BBC Westminster

2005 Chief Creative Officer, Endemol UK

2008 Chief Executive Officer, Endemol UK

2012 President, Endemol Group

2014 President, Endemol Shine Group

Other work Executive Chair, Edinburgh International Television Festival (2007-10)

Hobbies Arsenal FC; guitarist in No Expectations with Peter Fincham (on keyboard) and (once) Richard Desmond

On *The X Factor* ‘Getting people to fall back in love with you can be really hard’

On hits ‘Future hits will be more about the loyalty of the audience and a bit less about the size’



Paul Hampartsoumian

Will smart machines out-create us?

Television creatives let out a collective sigh of relief as artificial-intelligence expert Demis Hassabis ruled out the possibility of computers taking their jobs from them any time soon.

“We are a long way from machines being truly creative,” said the co-founder of machine-learning start-up DeepMind Technologies. But, Hassabis warned: “I don’t think it’s impossible.

“Most people’s jobs in the audience are safe for a long time. I don’t think there are going to be any [computer]

Artificial intelligence

Demis Hassabis reflects on the obstacles to building intelligent machines that could make TV shows. **Matthew Bell** is relieved

directors of the quality of, say, Ridley Scott, if ever – that’s one of the last things that a computer will be able to do,” Hassabis continued. Humans, he argued, have “aesthetic judgement”.

Hassabis was giving the second RTS/Institution of Engineering and Technology Joint Public Lecture, which was held this year at the British Museum in early November. The inaugural lecture, last year, was given by technology entrepreneur Mike Lynch at London’s Royal Society.

BBC Worldwide chief Tim Davie chaired the talk. “We are lucky enough to be enjoying another golden age of

advancement that demands public engagement and debate," he said. "Artificial intelligence in recent years has become one of the hottest topics, dominating the media and the imagination of the public."

The subject of Hassabis's lecture was artificial intelligence, which he defined as "the science of making machines smart", and its likely impact on the future. He accepted the invitation, partly, he said, because "I love the idea of bringing together the RTS and the creative arts with the engineering [focus] of the IET".

Hassabis, 39, set up DeepMind in 2010, describing the company, which has at its disposal almost 150 of the world's top research scientists, as an "Apollo programme for artificial intelligence – a moon-shot project that focuses on ambitious, long-term goals".

"We are trying to combine the best from Silicon Valley start-ups with the best of academic institutes such as MIT, UCL and Cambridge, to see if we can fuse that and find a new, hybrid way of doing science that is more productive and efficient, while still allowing for extreme creativity," said Hassabis.

DeepMind's aims, which are nothing if not ambitious, are twofold: "We want to solve intelligence. What we're interested in is understanding natural intelligence, that is, the human mind, and then recreating it artificially, and then using that technology to help us solve everything else," he explained.

Hassabis admitted that the latter may seem "a little bit far-fetched, possibly a bit fanciful to some of you, but we really believe that step two naturally follows from step one".

The question on the lips of the many TV people in the audience was whether artificial intelligence could help to solve any of the industry's pressing problems. Channel 4 Chief Executive David Abraham asked whether Hassabis was working on recommendation engines that could be used by broadcasters to match viewers with shows they would want to watch.

"We are looking at recommendation systems in all sorts of forms – it's a very interesting area and something our technology is applicable to," he replied.

The aim, Hassabis continued, was to "model user journeys in a way that delivers much more compelling content or recommendations. The current systems we have are not good enough." >

QUESTION & ANSWER

Q What role could artificial intelligence play in health diagnosis and treatment?

A Demis Hassabis: Health care is one of the main application areas we're focusing on... I think we could revolutionise the quality and efficiency of care.

Q How can artificial intelligence help the creative process and the creation of media?

A Demis Hassabis: I think that's a lot tougher. Recommendation is the obvious [use] but we are looking at things such as music, which is more [suitable] for computers than visuals, which are incredibly hard. There is some very interesting work being done in music composition and analysis.

Q Why did you decide to publish the codes you design and were you ever concerned that they might fall into the wrong hands?

A Demis Hassabis: We try to be as open as possible about what we're doing, so we generally publish almost everything...

It may not always be the case for the stuff we do, and we will have to consider that on a case-by-case basis. But, in general, where we can, we like to engage and support the academic community.

We think it is important that knowledge is shared – that's the way that humanity can advance as quickly as possible.

Q There is concern from, among others, Stephen Hawking, about artificial intelligence: in effect, once you let the genie out of the bottle, we're all fucked. What do you think?

A Demis Hassabis: I've had a long chat with Stephen Hawking about this and... I think he was quite reassured after we talked about how, specifically, we were approaching it...

There are big issues here [but] the problems are much more prosaic at the moment and it's easy to get carried away with science-fiction scenarios that are many decades away.

Deep Blue: good at chess, but hopeless at noughts and crosses

'We're interested in artificial general intelligence, the idea of a general learning system,' explained Demis Hassabis. This is different from 'narrow artificial intelligence', which has been built in a bespoke way for one specific task, such as self-driving cars or the intelligent personal assistant, Siri, on Apple smartphones.

The most famous example of artificial intelligence remains the man-versus-machine chess contests in 1996, when man triumphed, and 1997, when the machine took its revenge.

'This was a watershed moment in artificial intelligence, when IBM's Deep Blue beat [world champion] Garry Kasparov in a six-game chess match,' Hassabis explained.

'I came away more impressed by Kasparov's mind than the Deep Blue machine. It was an impressive

engineering feat, but Deep Blue was programmed by a major team of programmers along with a bunch of chess grandmasters trying to distil chess knowledge into an algorithmic construct.

'Deep Blue was very good at chess but no use at anything else, including simpler things such as playing noughts and crosses. Nothing that Deep Blue knew or that was in its code would have helped it with something simple like that, let alone other things such as speaking languages or driving a car, which Gary Kasparov could do effortlessly.'



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Corbis

From gaming to neuroscience

The origins of Demis Hassabis's interest in artificial intelligence lie in games – initially chess, which he played from the age of four. His interest in gaming continued into adulthood and Hassabis is a five-times world games champion.

Hassabis bought his first computer – a Sinclair ZX Spectrum – at the age of eight with winnings from a chess tournament and taught himself to programme. 'I realised on an intuitive level that a computer is a special type of machine,' he said. 'They extend the capabilities of the brain.'

At the age of 17, Hassabis programmed the popular game *Theme Park*, which came onto the market in 1994. 'My love of computers and games came together in an obvious way, in the designing of video games,' he recalled.

'In the early and mid-1990s, computer games were pushing the cutting edge of engineering,' he continued. 'Furthermore, the games I used to design and programme all involved artificial intelligence as a core game-playing mechanic.'

Theme Park was a business simulation game that challenged players to design a profitable Disneyland-type park, which 'spawned a whole genre of management simulation games', said Hassabis. 'The artificial intelligence adapted to the way the

player played the game, so every single person who played had a unique experience,' he said.

Hassabis worked in commercial gaming and founded the games company Elixir Studios, producing award-winning games for Microsoft and Universal, before returning to academia. He already possessed a double first in computer science from Cambridge University; now, he signed up for a PhD in cognitive neuroscience at UCL.

'This was another piece of the puzzle that I needed before launching a [project] such as DeepMind. I wanted to understand more about how the brain solves tough problems such as imagination and memory,' he said.

The scientists at DeepMind use video games as a test bed for the capabilities of artificial intelligence. 'It's very easy to measure progress, because most games have scores, so you can see if your algorithmic tweaks are gaining you an advantage and taking you in the right direction,' explained Hassabis.

DeepMind has recently developed artificial intelligence that can play Atari games from the 1970s and 1980s, including *Breakout*, better than humans. Overnight, it taught itself to play the much-loved game, moving quickly from novice to world beater.

»» **Technology vs people, page 35**

» He predicted that new and better recommendation systems would be available in "four or five years".

Hassabis identified "information overload" as one of the biggest problems facing society – and TV, too. "In the world of television, there are so many channels and modes of watching things – how can [viewers] find what they are interested in?"

"Personalisation is one kind of technology that might help but it doesn't really work because it is based, at the moment, on quite primitive technology, which doesn't give unique recommendations to what I would call [a person's] long tail of interests."

DeepMind was bought by Google for a reported £400m in January 2014. Hassabis is now Vice President of Engineering at Google DeepMind and in charge of the company's artificial intelligence projects. He defended the decision to sell the company – a member of the audience said that he had "taken the Yankee dollar".

"We decided to join forces with them, partly because the people high up at Google thought that [our] ethics committee was a good idea. We had already ruled out obvious things such as military or intelligence applications," replied Hassabis.

Almost two years after the sale, Hassabis pointed out that DeepMind had kept its London headquarters. "We've invested in our research team in King's Cross – the whole of DeepMind is still UK-side. We work as a semi-autonomous unit," he said.

Some scientists, including Stephen Hawking, have expressed concerns about artificial intelligence becoming too powerful. He told the BBC late last year that it "could spell the end of the human race". He feared that it could "take off on its own and redesign itself at an ever-increasing rate".

Hassabis accepted that artificial intelligence posed ethical questions: "As with all powerful, new technologies – and artificial intelligence is no different – we have to be cognisant about using them ethically and responsibly."

"Although human-level, general artificial intelligence is many decades away, I think we should start the debate now."

The 2015 RTS/IET Joint Public Lecture was given by Demis Hassabis at the British Museum in central London on 4 November. The producer was Helen Scott.

Screenwriting

Dramatist **Jack Thorne** talks to **Steve Clarke** about his new series, *The Last Panthers*, and explains why artifice is the enemy of good drama

Picture redacted

Martin Goodwin/The Guardian

The truth of storytelling

As a child, Jack Thorne was a devoted TV viewer who'd sometimes risk compromising his personal hygiene – all for the sake of his favourite programmes. He was reluctant to leave the box's magical embrace and delayed taking a shower until the commercial break rolled round.

"That's fine when you're eight, but less good when you're 14," says Thorne. He has a wide, open face, which lights up like a Belisha beacon when he recalls his childhood and adolescent TV addiction.

Spending a lot of time as a couch

potato turned out to be an investment. Thorne, now 36, is one of TV's most in-demand screenwriters and in the fortunate position of being able to choose the shows he writes.

Three years ago, he won two Baftas: the Mini Series Award for Channel 4's *This Is England '88*, and the Drama Series Award for BBC Three's supernatural drama *The Fades*, axed after one series due to cost cutting.

This month sees the debut of what is perhaps Thorne's most ambitious TV project yet: Sky Atlantic's flagship autumn drama, *The Last Panthers*.

The stylish, six-part film takes a robbery by a gang of Serbian jewel thieves as the starting point for a tense

exploration of Central Europe's dark, criminal underbelly and its links to big business. It stars John Hurt, Samantha Morton, French actor Tahar Rahim and Croatian Goran Bogdan.

It is not a traditional action thriller. *The Last Panthers* is a troubling, dark delight, the result of extensive research that Thorne undertook in places such as Serbia, alongside French investigative journalist Jérôme Pierrat. The Frenchman had originally conceived the idea for *The Last Panthers* as a feature film.

"We met policemen, criminals and all sorts of people who were useful in building this portrait," says Thorne. He is a shy, nervous, talkative man >

WOULD 'CATHY COME HOME' WORK AS WELL NOW OR WOULD IT BE ON BBC FOUR AND SEEN BY 20 PEOPLE?

› who obviously loves his work. His career as a dramatist began in the theatre not that long after graduating from Cambridge. Thorne read social and political sciences.

Not that there is anything remotely Oxbridge about him, despite his intellectual face. He lacks that kind of smooth or seemingly innate self-confidence – a by-product, perhaps, of having attended a comprehensive school in Newbury.

At Cambridge, he was laid low by Cholinergic urticaria, a disease of the immune system that makes sufferers allergic to their own body heat.

His symptoms are controlled by medication. "It's related to anxiety. When it first occurred, I spent six months bed-bound and still struggle with it now... I don't have serious attacks any more. The last time I got properly ill was on my honeymoon. Since then, it's been sort of OK.

"*The Last Panthers* is fiction inspired by real people," Thorne explains. "We don't shy away from the genre elements of it... It is not a po-faced drama that develops out of something quite exciting. The show is a character piece held within a genre."

In writing the series, Thorne was influenced by Paul Abbott's gripping BBC political thriller, *State of Play*, unhappily reworked for the big screen.

"I wanted to try and recreate that tension," says Thorne, casually dressed in expensive trainers, jeans and a CND hoodie. He's been a member of the

Labour Party for 20 years. And, yes, after a lot of soul-searching, he voted for Jeremy Corbyn in the recent leadership election.

Unusually for a Thorne collaboration, *The Last Panthers* is an Anglo-French co-production; the producers are Haut et Court (famous for *The Returned*,



Channel 4

shown by Channel 4 in the UK) and Warp Films, maker of *This Is England*.

Did the production process involve a high degree of compromise because of the need to appeal to audiences in different countries?

"I probably had fewer channel notes on this than anything I've ever done, from Sky and Canal+. They trusted everyone involved.... There were quite a few producers and we worked incredibly hard on the scripts.

"The producers were not all English. Instead of meeting for half a day, you'd meet for three-day stretches and do an incredible amount in those three days... It made it very intense for those days..."

"Anne Mensah [Sky's Head of Drama]

always says her big thing is not to create a show that lots of people like, but to create a show that some people love."

Thorne is no stranger to shows that have cult followings. His big break in television came on *Skins*, E4's raunchy take on teenage life in the early 21st century. He credits its creator,

Bryan Elsley, with helping him to understand and master the grammar of TV screenwriting.

"On *Skins*, Bryan was incredible with all of us writers. There's an awful lot of people who've got Bryan to thank for their careers in TV," Thorne says.

Working more or less full-time for Elsley for two years, the fledgling screenwriter was impressed by how much freedom Elsley gave Thorne and the other scribes on

the *Skins* team.

"I would get more exasperated with him than he would with me. He really did teach me about camera path – learning the story that you want to tell and how to use the camera when you're telling your story."

Thorne is reputed to be a workaholic, labouring non-stop from 10:00am to 8:00pm on his laptop, mainly at a library near his north London home. Away from his computer, he likes to read screenplays.

Currently, he is devouring Troy Kennedy Martin's era-defining *Edge of Darkness*. "The script is absolutely beautiful, the way he uses directions..."

For Thorne, the mark of an

THE TIMES WHEN I THINK I'VE FAILED HAVE BEEN BECAUSE I HAVEN'T BEEN TRUTHFUL ENOUGH



Sky

What are the main differences between writing for the stage and writing for TV? “The theatre allows you complexity. But it is a different form of complexity. Theatre probably is more comfortable with subtext. Often [on TV], fast cutting means you are increasingly in a world of text, rather than subtext.

“But you try and resist that where possible. In theatre, you are not able to cut around, so, therefore, you are in a story. You can’t have a lot of plates spinning. *The Last Panthers* wouldn’t work on stage because you are all over the place, including flashbacks.... There are three stories being told.

“The story possibilities on TV are probably greater and the ability to move through a story fast is probably greater. The danger in TV is that you end up in a world of text, particularly as your work gets cut for the edit.”

Screenwriters with form, such as Thorne, are apparently in a seller’s market. Is he making a lot of money? “I am doing all right. [But] the thing is: never take a job simply because it pays well.”

Does he agree that we are experiencing a golden age of TV drama? “There was a lot of good drama made previously so, if we *are* living a golden age.... As I have said, I read *Edge of Darkness* and I think, ‘This is just supreme.’ I read a lot of Dennis Potter. The ability he had to tell those stories. In the 1970s, to have a mainstream show such as *Z Cars*....

“I’ve got a lot of those scripts and that was a show getting millions of viewers for dark and interesting subject matter.

“Would *Cathy Come Home* work as well now or would it be on BBC Four and seen by 20 people? We live in a really exciting age when lots of things are possible.

“I am really grateful to live in this age but.... I watch a lot of TV. I am inspired by it, but I also enjoy watching crap.”

outstanding drama is that it must be truthful to its subject: “The times when I think I’ve failed have been because I haven’t been truthful enough. Above all else, I think it’s got to be truthful. If it’s truthful, then people will feel it....

“As soon as you descend into artifice, you not only lose viewers, you also betray a lot of people who need to have their story told properly.”

Having their stories told accurately is something very much in Thorne’s mind at the moment, as he works on the script for *National Treasure*. It is the story of a celebrity alleged sex offender, inspired by Operation Yewtree.

“I have spoken to a lot of people who have had a lot of horrible things happen

to them. That sense of responsibility is massive on this show,” Thorne says. “It is a story that needs to be told. It is something that drama can do. The news can only tell one story and can’t take you inside someone’s head.”

Alongside *National Treasure* (commissioned by Channel 4 and due for broadcast in 2016), he is working on JK Rowling’s first Harry Potter stage play, *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*.

Due to the tight security involved in the Potter project, he is unable to talk about the script in any detail. He does, however, say that working with Rowling is a good antidote to writing something as potentially disturbing as *National Treasure*.

Content

An expert panel examines the challenges facing TV comedy in the digital era.
Stuart Kemp reports



The serious business of

The classic sitcom no longer rules the TV schedules in the way that shows such as *Fawlty Towers*, *Open All Hours* and *Porridge* did in the 1970s. Or does it?

A panel of TV practitioners attempted to tease out the answer last month at an RTS early-evening event, “No laughing matter: how does comedy fight back?” This stimulating debate made one think that we could be living through another golden age of TV comedy without necessarily knowing it.

“When you look back at those titles of the 1970s, the appetite for shows such as *Only Fools and Horses* [on UKTV Gold] remains insatiable,” said UKTV Senior Commissioning Editor Simon Lupton. “If we could make more sitcoms and make the channels feel more confident about putting them in primetime, right in the heart of the schedule, and take the risk that they will deliver a big audience, that would be good.”

Lupton joined UKTV in 2014, tasked with commissioning high-quality scripted content. He oversees comedy on UKTV channels Gold and Dave. He cited next year’s return, on ITV, of *Birds of a Feather* to ITV, for what will be its

12th series, as a vote of confidence in the traditional sitcom. *Peter Kay’s Car Share*, which debuted on the BBC iPlayer before being shown in primetime on BBC One, was also highlighted as a shining example of the genre.

Nerys Evans, Channel 4’s Deputy Head of Comedy, noted that the 1970s were regarded as the golden age of television across all programme categories, not just sitcoms.

“You had three channels that 20 million people watched quite regularly,” Evans told the audience. “You’re not really comparing like with like if you think of how many places there are these days to watch comedy.”

But while the number of channels and platforms had proliferated in the intervening decades, panellists felt the standard of TV comedy had remained

high. “If you get the show right, there is a huge audience for comedy. It doesn’t have to be baking, dancing or singing to get big audiences,” said Lupton.

Original sitcoms for UKTV channel Gold include the three-part *Bull*, starring Maureen Lipman and Robert Lindsay, written by newcomers Gareth Gwynn and John-Luke Roberts.

It also has upcoming a comedy drama, *Do Not Disturb*, starring Catherine Tate and Miles Jupp.

But had the quality fallen off, with the fresh crop of TV comedy falling short of the so-called golden age, probed event chair Boyd Hilton.

BBC comedy commissioner Gregor Sharp cautioned against rose-tinted glasses when comparing the classics with today’s shows. “Quality is always variable and there was no period when all comedy on TV was universally strong,” he insisted.

Comedy creator, actress and writer Jessica Knappett said that there was a tendency to romanticise the past. Her third series of *Drifters* is rolling out on E4, Channel 4’s youth-skewed channel.

“I’m sure there was a lot of terrible comedy in the 1970s, as well. If we all sat down and watched the telly from 1973 tonight we’d have a terrible time,”

THERE WAS NO PERIOD WHEN ALL COMEDY ON TV WAS UNIVERSALLY STRONG



From left: Nerys Evans, Simon Lupton, Gregor Sharp, Jessica Knappett and Boyd Hilton

Paul Hampartsoumian

Are US writers' rooms the way ahead?

The speakers discussed how British writers' rooms work, why long-running British comedy series are conspicuous by their absence, and the thinking behind commissioning in volume.

'We don't really do much team writing [here] on shows because there just isn't the money that the Americans have,' said Channel 4's Nerys Evans.

Writer Jessica Knappett said she couldn't imagine the pain of having to write all the episodes necessary to match the US output of a *Big Bang Theory*, *Friends* or *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*. But it was a pain she'd like to have.

'I'm very envious, in a sense, of their budgets... and I love the idea of team writing and showrunners and everything. I think it's a great way to write,' said Knappett. 'I'm also envious of how long an opportunity they are given to grow an audience. You need the time to break it in and, as a writer, need that time to understand your own voice.'

Long-running shows rest on the imagination of individuals.

'We can't put pressure on individual writers to write in that volume, there's a bit more caution about how shows will fare over the long term,' said the BBC's Gregor Sharp.

Sky's commitment to the supermarket sitcom *Trollied* – it returned in November for a fifth season, with a run of eight episodes – was heralded as an example of volume commissioning.

'The work ethic of the American system is incredibly intense. That's not to deride anyone working in the UK, but the culture there is ferocious,' Sharp said. He mused that having a writers' room didn't necessarily make the scripts funnier, it just meant longer series.

Lupton said that he commissioned three pilot episodes for *Bull* for business and creative reasons: 'Scheduling a single half-hour is a nightmare, you just can't justify the marketing spend to promote it. And it gets lost in the schedule, particularly when you don't have a huge amount of original content anyway.'

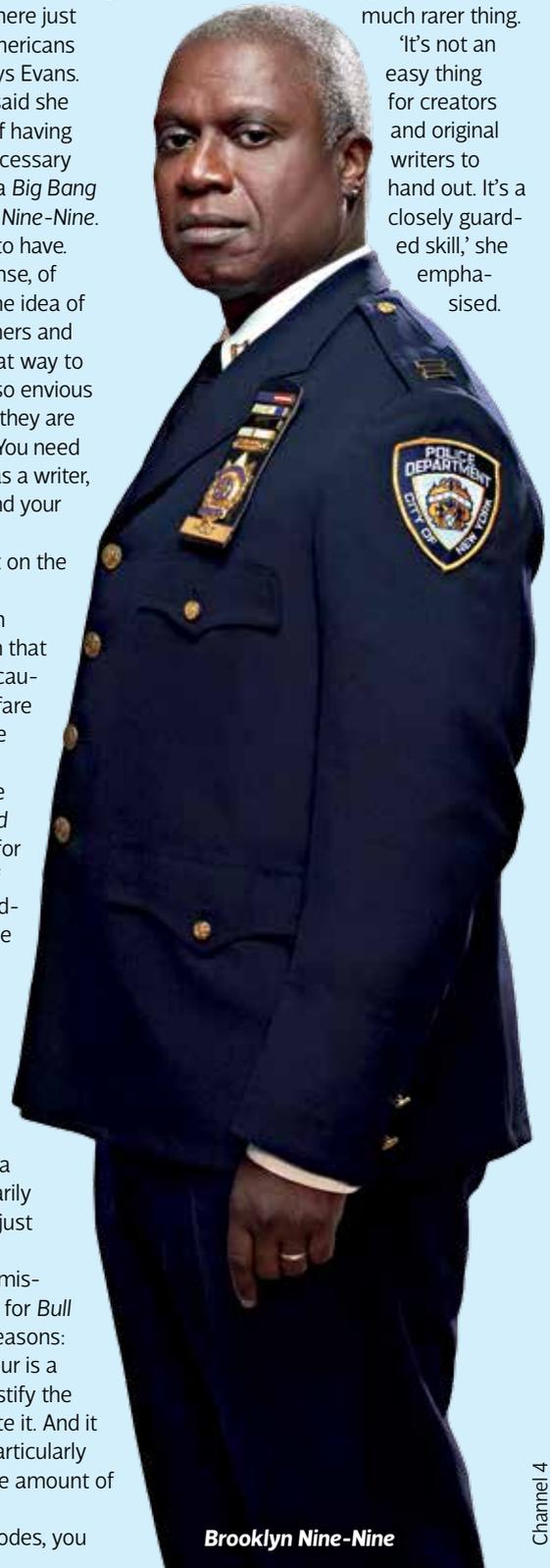
'By putting on three episodes, you

can schedule it properly, get behind it and promote it.'

Evans noted that, while drama productions can get people to come in and write episodes, for comedy this

approach is a much rarer thing.

'It's not an easy thing for creators and original writers to hand out. It's a closely guarded skill,' she emphasised.



Brooklyn Nine-Nine

Channel 4

comedy

she said. "I'm here to stick up for the present."

Hilton turned to the current crop of TV comedy. He name-checked the BBC's *Cradle to Grave*, *Boy Meets Girl* and *The Kennedys*, plus Channel 4's *Chewing Gum* and *Drifters* as proof that comedy in 2015 was in rude health.

"I don't think we should lose faith in the form just because it's not delivering quite the numbers it has in the past," said Lupton. "There have been some attempts in recent years that haven't been good enough..."

"Over time, you do it and, if it doesn't work, it damages the form," Lupton said. "I think [the sitcom] is alive and kicking and we're deliberately going into that space."

The challenges to traditional broadcasters and programme-makers are coming from sources that didn't exist in the 1970s. Deep-pocketed, online giants such as Netflix and Amazon Prime are emerging as bidders for comedy talent used to working in TV.

They promise creative freedom and big money to write original shows. Netflix is debuting *Master of None*, created, written and directed by *Parks and Recreation* star Aziz Ansari this month. Meanwhile, Amazon Prime is enjoying >

▶ success with the darkly comic *Transparent*, created by Jill Soloway.

The arrival of video-on-demand services, pumping cash into comedy – and their schedule-free model – adds to the pressure on broadcasters to maintain talent relationships and find audiences for comedy.

Lupton said that VoD services were changing the way viewers consumed comedy. “Netflix has thrown down the gauntlet,” he said. “There’s going to be a whole generation of viewers for whom the thought of coming back to something once a week over six weeks to decide whether they like a show is going to be completely alien.

“Viewers will wonder why they can’t just watch it all in one go, or at least the first three episodes, and decide if they like it.... We, as linear channels, have to find a way of combating that.”

Knappett, herself a product of E4’s ambitions to back fresh talent, believed that the prospect of creative freedom had huge allure. “People do want to be left alone, to an extent,” she observed.

But Evans, who helped steer shows such as *Drifters* and *Catastrophe* to screen, cautioned against the desire for outright creative freedom.

“If you’re just given a blank cheque and told to go off and do ‘whatever’, you’re not really going to have the safeguards that you have when working closely with a channel that really knows you and has worked with you and can advise you,” she said. “I’m not talking about micromanaging. We’ve got years of experience of producing comedy and can help and advise on how – hopefully – to make things better.”

Sharp played down any suggestion that talent was not given creative freedom at the BBC. He singled out *Mrs Brown’s Boys*, created, written by and starring Brendan O’Carroll: “He [O’Carroll] goes off and writes the scripts and turns up very late in the day and makes the show. Mackenzie Crook is the same with *Detectorists*.”

Sharp described launching a new project as “incredibly difficult”, compared with working on a second or third series of a show that had found its feet, with an established cast.

“You want to be as supportive as you can. It’s genuinely tricky,” he explained, emphasising that people were choosing what shows to watch in different ways nowadays.

“On iPlayer or 4oD, people tend to search by genre. People go looking for

comedy, so it’s a question of how strong channel identities are, because that guides the audience,” Sharp suggested.

This was why the decision to move BBC Three online next year was regarded as a blow by many comedy writers and performers. They have argued that the move will rob a new generation of a platform on which to build a following.

Knappett thought that the move felt like “a door closing – it’s an opportunity that’s been taken away from me. It isn’t going to help attract an audience for comedy.”

She was concerned that fewer broadcast slots were “a sure-fire way for the BBC to become more racist, classist and sexist overnight”.

Unsurprisingly, Sharp did not share her anxiety. “If we had the choice, we would probably prefer to have the channel exist as it does now, but it’s really about the quality of work. Great-quality work will always find an audience,” he insisted.

Sharp also pointed to the BBC’s pledge to push more BBC Three programmes onto BBC One and Two’s schedules: “In strict overall numbers, although there has been a cut in the budget for the service, comedy has been very well protected within that.”

So could the broadcast closure of BBC Three mean opportunities for the other comedy commissioners, asked Hilton.

It was not that simple, said Channel 4’s Evans. “I’m sure we’ll have more things pitched than we had before, but it has got to be right for us,” she said.

UKTV’s Lupton said that he was in the enviable position of having a CEO – Darren Childs – who was passionate about creating original comedy.

“Scripted is very much a huge part of it,” Lupton said. “As long as we pick shows that work, we’ll continue to commission in that format.”

He warned against simply aping what was being done “brilliantly elsewhere”.

Lupton conjured a laugh from the audience with his quip that UKTV also watched what worked and what didn’t at the BBC because “we’ll be getting it in a few years’ time”.

Everyone agreed on one thing. Comedy remains a serious business for the UK television industry. Get it right and laughs will attract audiences and loyalty like no other. Get it wrong and it’s sad times ahead.



Paul Hampartsoumian

WE DON'T
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HAVE

'No laughing matter: how does comedy fight back?' was an RTS early-evening event held at The Hospital Club, London, on 13 October. It was chaired by Heat TV Editor Boyd Hilton. The producers were Kerry Parker and Vicky Fairclough.

OUR FRIEND IN THE WEST

One of the best contributions to the issue of the public purposes of the BBC was written almost 20 years ago by a then-future Chair of the BBC Board of Governors, Gavyn Davies.

He wrote: “Some form of market failure must lie at the heart of any concept of public service broadcasting. Beyond simply using the catchphrase that public service broadcasting must ‘inform, educate and entertain’, we must add ‘inform, educate and entertain in a way that the private sector, left unregulated, would not do’. Otherwise, why not leave matters entirely to the private sector?”

My own sector, television production, has prospered on the back of necessary government intervention in 2004 to restrict monopoly abuse by broadcasters. These are clearly concepts that the country and successive governments are comfortable with.

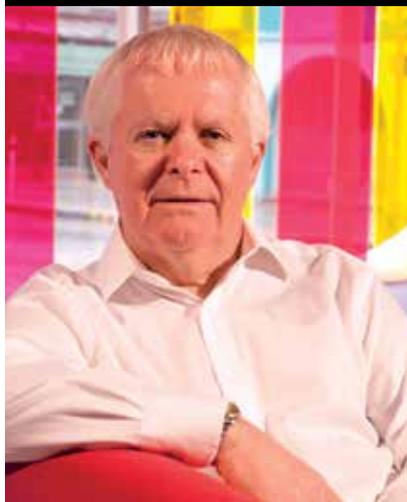
Today, the argument goes that, in the digital age, the market for content is more efficient. In this new world, lower entry cost, the absence of spectrum scarcity and new monetisation arrangements – such as subscription and pay-per-view – give people the programmes they want to watch.

These factors do change what we mean by PSB now. The market has made a difference. The issue is: what do we make of these changes in determining the public purposes of the BBC today?

It’s such a shame that this is a discussion the BBC seems reluctant to engage in. By maintaining that market failure is no part of its remit, it is, at the same time, delusional and dismissive of a key element in its importance to British public life.

I say delusional because, since its

The role of PSB is changing in the digital era, but the BBC is wrong to claim that market failure is not part of its remit, argues
Ron Jones



inception, the BBC has provided content that the market could not provide. This role continues in some areas of news and current affairs, in its significance in the nations and regions, and in UK-centric programming across many genres.

The BBC’s contribution to filling the market gap has sometimes been half-hearted. The size and wealth of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales mean that they suffer permanent market failure in television production and broadcasting.

The public-good argument has been strengthened by devolution, as these

countries build their new democracies within the UK. The BBC has not risen to the challenge.

In the case of my patch, Wales, the BBC has cut its spending and its commitment to providing what people want and what society needs.

The BBC produces a wide range of statistics that record its performance in Wales in terms of spending, hours and genres. All indicate significant, and mostly disproportionate, cuts. The analysis of market failure is right and the remedy is wrong.

In other cases, the BBC’s role has been to provide services before the market could. Whatever the later complaints by industry, the BBC’s early commitment to the iPlayer, online news services and education helped to create markets that others have benefited from.

Economists argue that subscription services help to create a more efficient market. Indeed, they do and that is what the BBC is. It is a subscription service made compulsory by the need of society to ensure that it provides the public goods that we all need but might, individually, not particularly want. The unique BBC remit blends what individuals want with what society needs.

By sticking to its slogan of “inform, educate and entertain” and no more, BBC managers and trustees are underselling our most important broadcaster.

The Government is calling for a review of the public purposes of the BBC. An honest appraisal on these lines would deliver a BBC that is stronger and that maintains its central role in British life. Gavyn Davies, all those years ago, had it about right.

Ron Jones is Executive Chair of Tinopolis Group, based in Llanelli, south-west Wales.

How TV defines the digital era

Some years ago, when *The Guardian* hosted a supper at the Edinburgh International Television Festival, there was an unfamiliar face sitting among the executive classes.

It should be said that, over the years, this event has been notable for a number of spectacular rows. And, in the interests of transparency, I have to admit that I was responsible for one of the worst, when I asked Luke Johnson, then Chair of Channel 4, what a “pizza maker” like him knew about television.

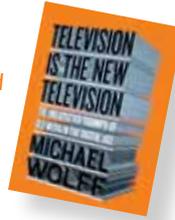
This bear pit should have been a perfect place for Michael Wolff to opine about television. Wolff is a bruiser. *The New York Times*, in its review of *Television Is the New Television*, writes: “Mr Wolff’s studied unpleasantness has emerged as a brand of sorts.” James Murdoch once called him “an obnoxious dickhead”.

Wolff’s targets over many years, in many different publications, have ranged from the flaky digital businesses that launched in the years before the dotcom crash at the turn of the century, to Rupert Murdoch, Tina Brown and, more recently, *The Guardian*, his host that night and a paper he contributed to for more than a decade.

Writing for *GQ* magazine in 2014, he poured cold water on the paper’s US ambitions in his trademark style. He said that *The Guardian* had a “kind of spunky or wildly speculative confidence that it could become an American voice”, but there was no way for it to make any money by doing so, Pulitzer Prize notwithstanding.

So his relative silence that night in Edinburgh was a surprise and something of a missed opportunity. His sceptical intelligence, his understanding of the complex ecosystem of US media and, above all, his capacity to pick a fight, arguing some outrageously contrarian position, make him the perfect dinner guest at media gatherings.

Television Is the New Television: The Unexpected Triumph of Old Media in the Digital Age, by Michael Wolff, is published by Portfolio, priced £17.60.



Book review

Michael Wolff likes to pick a fight. So how come he is praising traditional TV networks in his latest book? If only it were that simple, discovers Simon Shaps

In this latest assault, Wolff’s target is not television, but, in something of a rerun of his earlier book *Burn Rate*, the latest generation of what he sees as flaky digital businesses – BuzzFeed and Vice included. His charge against these businesses is that their ability to attract traffic is in inverse proportion to their ability to attract revenue.

Wolff argues that they are locked into a deathly spiral of low-grade content and poor ad rates. His heroes today are not from Silicon Valley, but Hollywood, with CBS CEO Les Moonves his prize exhibit. Wolff argues that Moonves has “reinvented broadcast television”, turning a “lagging business” into a “growth industry”.

Although viewers may have missed this reinvention, Wall Street hasn’t. In 2005, when Viacom split into two companies, CBS – comprising the broadcast network, alongside Showtime and joint-venture The CW – was deemed to be the less exciting set of assets and poorly positioned for growth.

Today, CBS is worth more than the combination of businesses now sitting under the Viacom umbrella: MTV, VH1, Comedy Central and Nickelodeon, to name but four.

This hasn’t been achieved by a dramatic increase in audiences or advertising revenue for his channels, but largely through a set of bloody negotiations for higher retransmission fees from cable operators.

More broadly, what Wolff argues is that traditional US television businesses that were thought to be threatened by digital disruptors have proved to be astonishingly resilient. At the same time, many of the digital disruptors, not least those invested in by traditional media companies to head off this supposed threat, are built on sand.

It is not merely the windfall of higher retransmission fees that explains the resilience of the traditional broadcasters. Wolff quotes an analyst at the investment bank RBC Capital Markets, who points out that an entire week of YouTube is worth about as much to major advertisers as a single, first-run episode of *The Big Bang Theory*.

The scarcity value of large audiences, even if those audiences are not quite as large as they used to be, trumps the aggregate value of hundreds of pieces of content, each one only delivering a relatively small number of viewers.

But television has protected its bottom line in other ways. In the US, television revenues from traditional broadcasters have diversified. Wolff writes: “From virtually 100% ad supported, television now gets half of its revenues from non-ad businesses – subscription, licensing, foreign sales.”

What is more, the linear channels at the heart of these businesses retain “a set of special, high-profile, one-time, real-time, can’t-avoid-the-ads events... in which advertising’s value, against the trends, continues to increase.”

To sum up, after lots of foolhardy



**AN ENTIRE
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ABOUT AS MUCH TO MAJOR
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A SINGLE
EPISODE
OF
THE BIG BANG THEORY**

than that. If television executives have suddenly doubled down on television, then so, too, have many of the digital disruptors. “Digital convergence,” he writes, “turns out not so much to be about bringing computing to your television, but about bringing more television to your television.”

Suddenly, a number of well-funded digital companies, who TV executives thought were up to something completely different from them – something they craved, but didn’t entirely understand, even if their kids did – turn out to be fishing in the same pool for talent, original programming and premium sports rights. Amazon, Google, Apple and Netflix, now that they have woken up to the power of television in its simplest form – engrossing narrative offering great production values – are fearsome competitors for the best content, and for eyeballs, however that content is delivered.

In the UK, just when the broadcast landscape looked like it was settling down, competition has suddenly got significantly tougher.

Wolff’s arguments do not stretch to figuring out which of the incumbent television businesses here is best equipped to deal with these new competitive pressures.

Perhaps one answer is that, to survive, companies need to have diversified revenue streams across pay, advertising and production. This leaves the publisher-broadcasters particularly vulnerable.

Another answer might be that the question doesn’t really make sense any longer, as the UK’s television industry becomes more and more intertwined, across production and broadcasting, with the major US media companies.

And then there is the BBC. It still performs remarkably well but, as the twin pressures of increased competition and downward pressure on the licence fee begin to bite, the BBC may begin a dramatic decline, as its overwhelming dependency on a single revenue stream proves unsustainable.

Television Is the New Television points to an irony that has become apparent only in the past couple of years. The digerati and traditional television executives spent many years eyeing each other up, coveting what the other had.

As Wolff might have put it, the answer all along was: it’s television, stupid!

Channel 4

investments in other stuff – radio, social media, shopping channels, data mining, sports franchises and all things “digital” – it turns out that the answer all along was television. “It was a curiously winding road for the television business to actually understand it was in the television business,” Wolff writes.

At this point in the argument –

page 115 to be precise – executives in traditional broadcast organisations would be advised to put the book down, send a quick congratulatory email to Wolff (*The Guardian* can probably still supply contact details) and start counting their share options.

In fact, life, as Wolff implicitly acknowledges, is more complicated

Hard graft and long hours

Three minutes to make an impression



Camera skills are essential

Barnaby Coughlin, director: ‘The business has changed. When I was younger, you learned your trade. I came out of college and I’d never picked up a camera. I went in as a runner and then became a researcher and then an assistant producer – there were very clear ways of getting to be a director.

‘Now, everyone is au fait with cameras before they even start... If you can shoot, you will get jobs... In my day, you didn’t have to shoot, there were cameramen. That world of self-shooting didn’t exist.

‘In the past five or six years, that’s become the predominant [way of working] in the industry.’

RTS Futures

You need to be dedicated to get ahead in TV – but the job satisfaction can be huge. **Matthew Bell reports**

TV is no place for the idle or faint of heart, according to the gurus at the latest RTS Futures speed-dating event. Building a career in the industry takes hard graft and passion – plus, course, an ability to do the job.

‘Unless your work ethic is really strong, [a career in TV] is not going to suit you. If it is, it is exciting and a real privilege,’ said Emily Lawson, Series Producer of Channel 4’s *The Supervet*.

Barnaby Coughlin, Series Director of BBC Two’s *Phone Shop Idol*, started as a runner on ITV breakfast service GMTV. ‘I was doing night shifts and working all the hours, but when you’re young you’ve got the energy and ambition to do that. It is an all-consuming industry – when you’re working on a project it takes over your life,’ he said.

Lawson and Coughlin were talking to *Television* magazine at ‘Speed date the content creators’ in early October,

which matched producers and directors with young TV hopefuls over a series of three-minute dates.

The factual and entertainment gurus reckoned that there were opportunities for newcomers to make their mark in their genres.

"It feels like an exciting time. There are many more documentary series now, compared with when I started," said producer/director Nicola Brown, whose credits include Channel 4

shows *The Secret Life of Four Year Olds* and *Educating Cardiff*. Fixed-rig shows, in particular, she added, were looking to hire.

Lawson said that there was "an appetite for returning series that grab the public's attention, so we're looking for people all the time".

"We take people on, certainly in the more junior roles. A good place to start is as a runner," said Claire Walls, Series Producer of BBC One's *The Apprentice*.

Landing a job on a long-running series could be the start of something big. "From year to year, they can move up [the ladder]. Runners last year become researchers on the next series," explained Walls's colleague Stephen Day, Series Editor on the Alan Sugar-fronted show, a TV fixture for the past decade.

Television can be a tough industry for beginners: work is irregular and often badly paid. Conditions, though, are improving, reckoned producer Jessica Jones, whose credits include BBC Two's *Great British Menu*.

"When I started, we were unpaid, sleeping on friends' sofas, grafting until three in the morning. Now, there seems to be a lot more respect for the younger and more junior members of staff, which is only a good thing," she said.

Newcomers should look beyond traditional television, argued Mike Matthews, who directed Channel 4's *Jamie's 15-Minute Meals*. "There are so many [online] channels out there. They're not conventional telly, but they need talented people to make [content] for them," he said.

"The skill set that you need to make great television has become broader," said Gemma Nightingale, Series Producer of *Ant & Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway*, the shiny floor show that first aired

in 2002. "As a TV producer, I now have to be aware of digital – we need to be available on so many more platforms than we did 13 years ago, when I started."

The TV industry can be a battlefield, with researchers, producers and directors fighting for work. Yet, once filming starts, differences have to be forgotten

and a close-knit team formed.

"Every person, whether they're doing work experience or are employed as the executive producer, has their

own job to do and they need to do that job well," said Nightingale. "If one person isn't supported by the people around them and can't do their job, you don't have a team."

"TV's an incredibly competitive industry and everyone wants to work on the big shows," said Nightingale's fellow *Saturday Night Takeaway* Series Producer Diego Rincon. "The energy of the show comes from the energy of the team, so you're not going to get anyone to watch [the show] if the team isn't behind it."

"It's also important to get many strings to your bow – in the more junior positions, you have the opportunity to try different things and that's brilliant," argued Matthews. "If you [specialise] too early, you can get pigeon-holed."

"Get on the shows that allow you to try different things," recommended Nightingale. "I've worked on *Takeaway* for eight series, starting as a researcher, and I've done most things on that show – I've set up shoots, worked with celebrities, done location shoots, live shows every Saturday, casting – that show has given me everything."

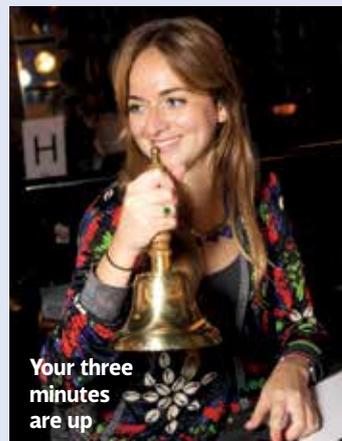
The gurus at the speed-dating event, however, cautioned against being in too much of a hurry. "People expect to be promoted too quickly now," said Walls. "Just because they've had a couple of jobs as a researcher, they think they're owed the next job up, but [often] they're not good enough."

"You learn an awful lot by doing different types of series."

The RTS Futures event, 'Speed date the content creators', was held on 5 October at the Amber Bar in central London. It was produced by Emily Gale and Carrie Britton.

BEING RUDE IS THE WORST THING YOU CAN DO IN TELLY

What's it take to succeed?



Your three minutes are up

Paul Hampartsoumian

Jessica Jones, producer: 'The ability to solve problems... being respectful to contributors, working hard.'

Nicola Brown, director: 'Enthusiasm and hard work. It's an incredibly demanding industry and [not for] anyone who wants to clock off at six.... Being a grafter, making cups of tea, carrying people's kit and learning the job as you go.'

Mike Matthews, director: 'The people who stick around are fun, hard-working, resourceful and innovative.... Being rude is the worst thing you can do in telly.'

Claire Walls, producer: 'A degree is not essential... as long as they show initiative, have intelligence and are quick learners.... These are the attributes we're looking for, regardless of qualifications.... Be a great team player and don't get above yourself....'

'Listen to everything that's going on around you and embrace the experience. Always ask questions... You have to like people, because television is all about people, whether it's the team you work with or the people you're filming.'

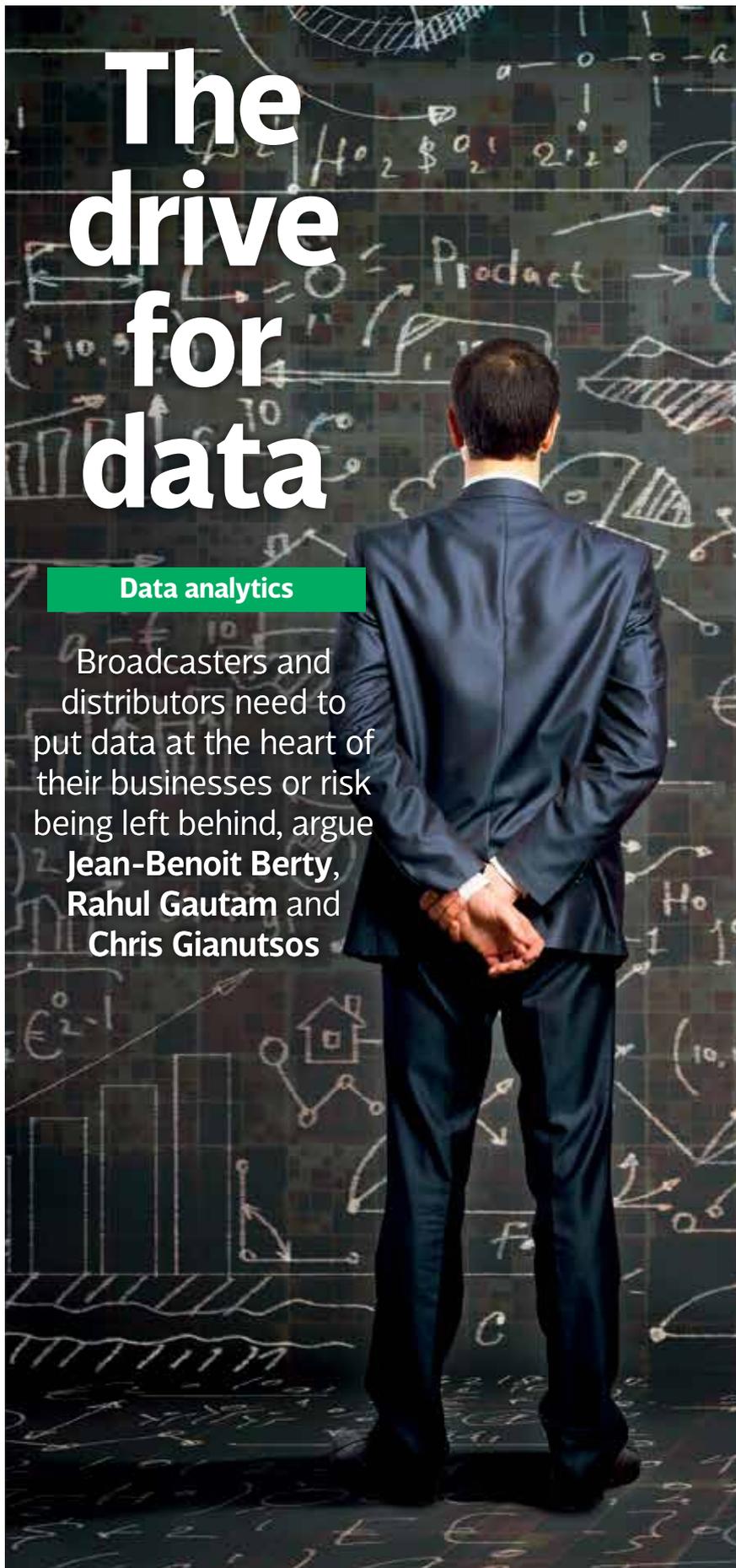
Gemma Nightingale, producer: 'People want to help and are interested in people who want to learn. There's no such thing as a stupid question.... If you have the energy, passion, enthusiasm and the bravery to be creative, that's what's going to make you stand out.'

The drive for data

Data analytics

Broadcasters and distributors need to put data at the heart of their businesses or risk being left behind, argue

**Jean-Benoit Berty,
Rahul Gautam and
Chris Gianutsos**



The TV industry is facing the greatest paradox in its long history. The quality of its craft and the demand for its product have never been higher. At the same time, its future commercial viability is very uncertain.

Digital has fundamentally and irrevocably altered television's business model. Not only are viewers watching more content than ever on digital devices, they're doing so across a wider range of platforms and in many different ways.

They're consuming what they want, when they want and how they want, and expect the industry to be able to keep up and adapt to their habits as quickly as these change. The onus is clearly on the TV industry to deliver on consumer expectations.

Consider that a study conducted by the Commercial Broadcasters Association, the UK industry body for digital, cable and satellite broadcasters, concluded that investment in UK content production aimed at their audiences increased nearly 50% between 2009 and 2014.

The major global over-the-top (OTT) players are expected to spend more than \$7bn on content in 2016, up more than 50% in just a single year.

Many think that this tide of money flooding into TV production from these new players has driven a new golden age of television, particularly for high-quality, scripted shows.

Unfortunately for broadcasters, the pace of innovation in business models is not keeping up with the pace of investment in content.

Jeff Zucker famously worried that media companies were "trading analogue dollars for digital pennies". These have now become dimes and quarters, but they still pale in comparison with the revenues generated by the legacy broadcast business.

This is true even as consumption moves away from the legacy model, particularly among younger viewers. In spite of the challenges, however, we believe there is a path to a profitable digital future, which includes building a more intimate relationship with customers, content and markets.

We see data analytics as a rare opportunity to create a true, sustainable, competitive advantage in an increasingly complex industry.

Few industries have as tenuous a relationship with data analytics as

television does in the UK, however. In all but the most progressive TV companies with a linear heritage, data analytics is confined to “special projects” or research, rather than being embraced as an integral component of decision-making across the business.

There appears to be a concern that data analytics represents a threat to the creative culture that develops compelling content.

One challenge is that legacy revenues are built on a system of measurement that struggles to fully understand modern consumption on the TV screen. This begins to fall apart when trying to include viewing on mobiles, tablets and other platforms.

Solving this problem calls for a new set of skills and capabilities, which requires significant investment, and not all this will pay off.

This dynamic robs data analytics of the attention and investment needed to build a sustainable capability that is available to support decision-makers.

Promoting data analytics from the fringes of a company’s activities to an integral part of the business starts with creating a common and clear understanding of the decisions that data analytics can enhance.

We believe there are five fundamental business decisions that highlight the power of data analytics in TV.

■ **How can multi-platform content distribution create a more direct and intimate relationship with viewers?**

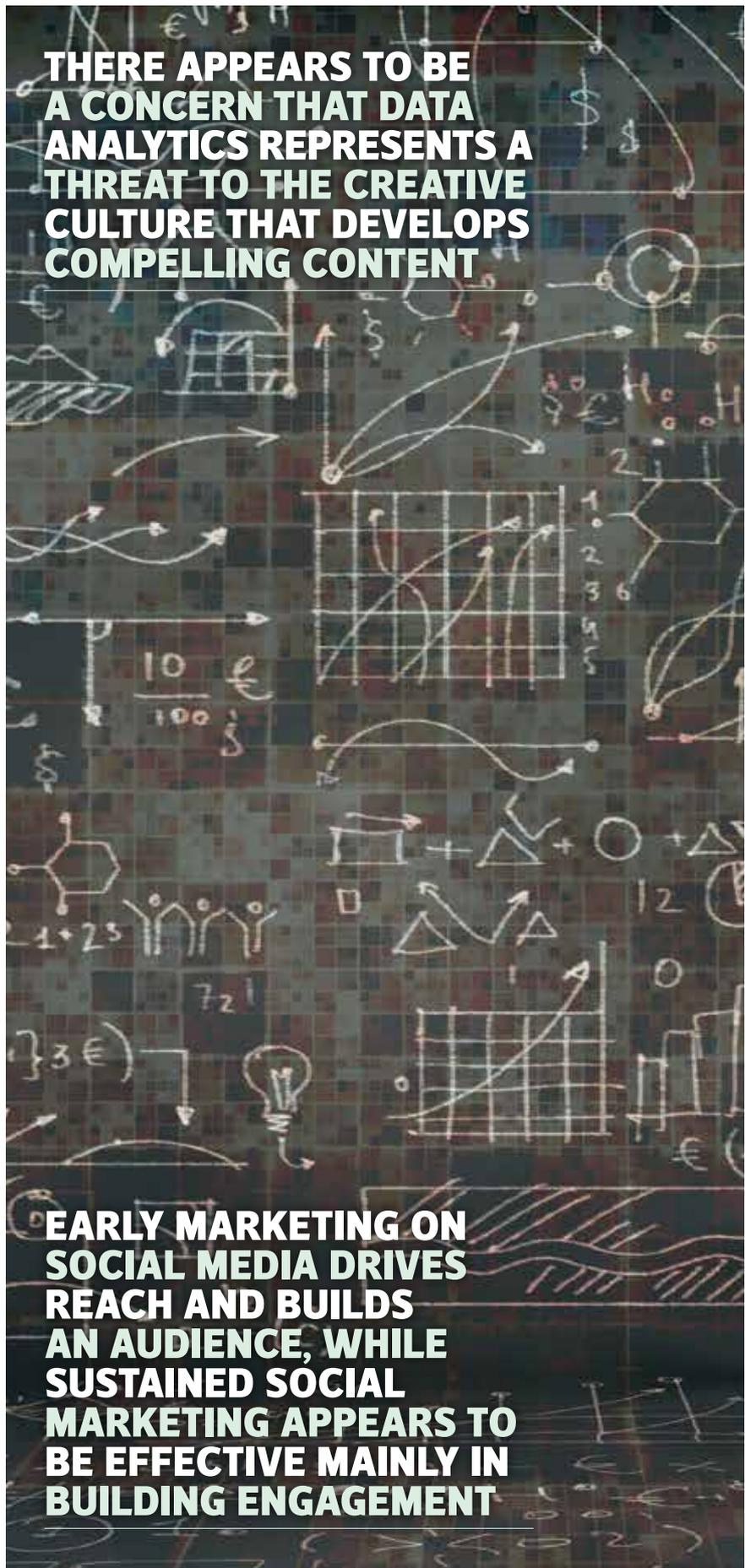
The undeniable, immediate benefit of investing in digital platforms is the opportunity to build one-to-one relationships with viewers.

While the promise of substantially higher advertising revenue may not yet have been fulfilled, there is a significant benefit to precisely targeting content and offers.

Over time, the accumulation of this data will introduce the concept of customer-relationship management to a sector that has never had the opportunity to establish and build genuine one-to-one customer relationships.

■ **How do we deliver a consistent customer experience when viewers may choose to consume the same content through multiple channels?**

Building a common understanding of who is watching which pieces of content online and on TV is not easy. It requires tagging content in a detailed and consistent way and tracking >



THERE APPEARS TO BE A CONCERN THAT DATA ANALYTICS REPRESENTS A THREAT TO THE CREATIVE CULTURE THAT DEVELOPS COMPELLING CONTENT

EARLY MARKETING ON SOCIAL MEDIA DRIVES REACH AND BUILDS AN AUDIENCE, WHILE SUSTAINED SOCIAL MARKETING APPEARS TO BE EFFECTIVE MAINLY IN BUILDING ENGAGEMENT

› online viewer behaviour. The most sophisticated companies are using social media and data patterns to create viewer profiles that bridge linear and digital viewership.

This insight can inform the design of a more relevant, cross-platform customer experience that increases engagement and loyalty.

■ How can social media be leveraged to drive reach and engagement when launching a new show?

A recent study by EY of the launch of a new programme analysed the relationship between social-media activity and Barb ratings.

The study demonstrated that social-media campaigns prior to launch can clearly contribute to expanding the audience for the programme. However, social-media activity weeks into a series does not consistently increase ratings.

Early marketing on social media drives reach and builds an audience, while sustained social marketing appears to be effective mainly in building engagement.

Marketers should, therefore, integrate social-media data with performance data and tailor social-media campaigns to focus either on reach or engagement as shows progress through a series.

■ How can we monetise content in new markets?

Developing a deeper, more reliable understanding of who is watching what content on which platforms can fundamentally alter decisions about how and where to distribute content.

Some forward-thinking international distributors are building market models to perform what-if scenario analyses. These reveal which markets are best suited for particular genres and programmes and the most lucrative distribution options.

■ How do we know which content to invest in?

The opportunity – and the competition – to acquire compelling content have never been greater.

New, niche, OTT platforms are providing an outlet for international content that would never have been seen outside local markets five years ago.

Developing a deeper understanding of viewer preferences, engaging with audiences more strategically and

having a view on the myriad commercial models available to monetise content can lead to a portfolio of content that aligns with strategic, financial and brand objectives.

Transforming data analytics into an integral business capability is hard, but attainable, work. The core components are straightforward:

■ Align your management team around a vision for data analytics that is acceptable to the culture but still looks ahead;

■ Set aside the funding needed to up-skill teams and develop new technologies that will become your desktop tools of the future; and

■ Define and execute a plan to organise and manage your data.

Evaluating which category of data (content, audience and/or market) can generate the greatest short-term benefits is an effective way of aligning investments in data analytics with strategic priorities.

Content owners looking to sell their shows in new markets may get the greatest benefit from focusing on market data to understand where they can get the most return for their product. Traditional, linear broadcasters, meanwhile, may be more interested in building a deeper understanding of their audience.

The role of data analytics in TV is not to replace the very human art of storytelling or to subvert the strategic role of commissioning; rather, it should serve to complement them and help drive creative risk-taking.

Effectively focused, data analytics should build more intimate relationships with customers, content and markets that can make the path to a sustainable business model shorter and more certain.

The greatest challenge broadcasters in the UK face is embracing the role of data analytics and rallying the support and commitment to build what can be a sustainable competitive advantage.

Jean-Benoit Berty is based in London and leads EY's Technology, Media and Telecommunications practice in the UK. Rahul Gautam is based in London and leads EY's Media & Entertainment Advisory practice in the UK. Chris Gianutsos is based in EY's New York office and focuses on digital strategy in the media and entertainment industries. The views reflected in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the global EY organisation or its member firms.

THE ROLE OF DATA ANALYTICS IN TV IS NOT TO REPLACE THE VERY HUMAN ART OF STORYTELLING OR TO SUBVERT THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF COMMISSIONING

Beowulf at the door



From left: Annie Hodgkiss, Julian Bellamy and Paul Pirie

TV expects its new multi-million-pound fantasy drama *Beowulf* to appeal to audiences too squeamish to watch HBO's gory *Game of Thrones*. And it's hoped that the franchise will build on the North East's growing reputation as a drama production base.

ITV Studios MD Julian Bellamy predicted that the new 13-part action series, filmed in Weardale and on Tyneside, will also have the broader appeal of more mainstream shows, such as BBC One's *Merlin*.

Bellamy was giving the annual North East & the Border lecture at Gateshead Old Town Hall, in association with the Cinema and Television Benevolent Fund, in mid-October. The fund was represented by Annie Hodgkiss and Paul Pirie.

At the event, he showed exclusive footage of *Beowulf*, which stars North-East actor Kieran Bew, William Hurt and a fearsome band of CGI trolls. The series is due to air in the new year.

"I expect it to compare favourably with shows such

as *Game of Thrones*," he said. "But it will be more accessible and not so extreme.

"*Game of Thrones* is estimated to have brought almost £90m directly and indirectly to the local Northern Irish economy. *Doctor Who* kick-started a film and media industry in Wales, which has seen a 52% increase in employment in the creative industries. *Beowulf* could do the same for the North East."

ITV Studios is currently making two major dramas in the region: *Beowulf* and the Brenda Blethyn detective series, *Vera*, which is now screened in 131 countries. The company's factual arm, Shiver, produces *Tales from Northumberland* with *Robson Green*.

ITV Studios is Europe's biggest production company and Bellamy is keen to widen its talent pool and strike deals with scripted and non-scripted producers in regions such as the North East.

"We are expanding the pool of talent in the region, which has got to be good for everyone. Talent attracts

talent and a cluster bomb of talent attracts commissions," said the former Channel 4 executive. "That's why we are open for all sorts of partnerships with all sorts of local indies and local talent.

"For ITV, regionality is increasingly seen as a key competitive advantage. In the past, it would have been just another thing to tick off on the ITV licence 'to do' list."

Bellamy said that ITV Studios made around two-thirds of its drama outside London and the South East. Add in its soaps, *Emmerdale* and *Coronation Street*, and the figure increased to 92%.

He argued that this level of activity proved that ITV was a more "accurate bellwether" of the health of regional production than the BBC. "The BBC had to do what it did [moving to Salford] and spend big in the regions to justify a licence fee raised from the whole of the UK. ITV doesn't. ITV is now largely able to do what suits ITV commercially.

"The past few years have taught us that our bread doesn't get buttered in London. The wellspring of what we do, the reason we connect with audiences, comes from ITV's deep roots outside London. Obligation has morphed into opportunity."

Taking questions from the audience, Bellamy admitted that broadcasters could do more to make it easier for producers facing the practical difficulties of being based far from London. But he said that the industry had woken up to the notion that, when it came to ideas and talent, the answer lay in "acting local and going global".

Graeme Thompson

Sci-fi writer shares tips for success



Phil Ford

■ Birmingham-born writer Phil Ford – the co-creator, with Russell T Davies, of CBBC series

Wizards vs Aliens – discussed his career in front of an audience of RTS Midlands and Writers' Guild members in October.

Ford was quizzed by BBC One *Midlands Today* presenter Joanne Malin at the BBC Academy in Birmingham. The conversation ranged across his TV work and provided valuable insights into the craft of writing.

A former journalist, Ford's credits run from soaps, including *Coronation Street*, to the long-running series *Bad Girls*, *Waterloo Road* and *Footballers' Wives*.

On writing for established series, he argued that the "voices" of characters were paramount, explaining that viewers should know *who* is speaking by *what* they say.

Ford has written many top children's and family dramas. He was the lead writer and co-producer of CBBC's *The Sarah Jane Adventures*, and has also penned episodes of the BBC sci-fi series *Doctor Who* and *Torchwood*.

According to Ford, the secret of writing supernatural drama for young people is that you are allowed to scare, but not terrify, them.

Ford, who is currently working on a new, six-part series about Dracula, advised would-be TV writers to "write, write, write".

Dorothy Hobson

Celtic shop props up TV industry

A group of RTS Wales members visited Celtic Prop Hire in early October, and saw items used in top TV shows, including BBC One's *Doctor Who*, for which Celtic supplied a bust of Beethoven in the current series.

Established in 1999, the Cardiff-based company supplies productions across the UK. Recent credits include Sky 1's *Agatha Raisin* and *Stella*, and BBC One's *Under Milk Wood*. The company also supplies a lot of props to the BBC's Drama Village in Cardiff Bay, including for the long-running medical series *Casualty*.

Company Director Natalie Rolley took members on a guided tour of the extraordinary range of items held by Celtic Prop Hire, which are grouped together in scenes. "This helps clients because the need for realism usually



leads them to think of additional items," she said.

There is a marked seasonal demand for some props, with intense competition between production companies and theatre groups at Halloween and Christmas. "A lot of schools are producing *Les Misérables* at the moment,

so we get a lot of requests for muskets and tankards," said Rolley.

One of the more unusual items kept by the company is a gigantic WC, although "there's not much demand for that", she conceded.

RTS Wales members also examined the vast range of

TV sets kept by the company, from the earliest post-war models to the latest flat screens.

At the end of the visit, members were treated to an imaginary banquet, featuring goblets, false grapes and a centrepiece wild boar's head. **Hywel Wiliam**

Comedy legend returns to Leeds



Barry Cryer (right) talking to Louis Barfe

Gavin Moffitt

Yorkshire RTS invited Barry Cryer back to his Leeds birthplace for an evening of showbiz anecdotes. The comedian and writer, who turned 80 earlier this year,

showed a sell-out crowd that he has lost none of his wit and sparkle.

The event took place in mid-October at the atmospheric Holy Trinity Church,

just yards away from where Cryer started his extraordinary career, at the City Varieties Music Hall.

Interviewed by author and broadcaster Louis Barfe, the comic spoke warmly about his early days in variety, including his time at London's famous Windmill Theatre.

As Cryer moved on to his illustrious career in TV and radio, the stories and famous names came thick and fast.

Over the years, he seems to have worked with all the great names of TV comedy, including Morecambe and Wise, Kenny Everett, Danny La Rue, Mike Yarwood, Spike Milligan and the Two Ronnies. All of whom he spoke about with great warmth and affection.

Cryer paid tribute to *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin*

writer David Nobbs, who died earlier this year. They worked together on *The Frost Report* and *Sez Les* with the inimitable Les Dawson.

He also spoke with fondness about his time working at Yorkshire Television in the 1970s and 1980s, a period when the great and good of TV comedy could be found at the Kirkstall Road studios. However, Cryer also expressed great admiration for Britain's current crop of comedians, particularly Ross Noble.

The evening was a treat for lovers of classic British comedy and entertainment, and a reminder of the importance of the men and women who undertake the deadly serious business of writing comedy.

Lisa Holdsworth

Renowned futurist David Wood has warned against a world in which “technology runs out of control”, and viewers and consumers are “manipulated” by machines.

Wood was speaking on the “accelerating digital revolution” at a special, members-only London Centre event, hosted at IBC’s UK headquarters in October.

The futurist, he explained, “anticipates a set of possible futures, including things that could go very badly [wrong], but, equally, is looking for opportunities”. Before embarking on his career as a technological seer, Wood was a pioneer of the smartphone industry.

“As a society, we’re not very good at anticipating big, disruptive change,” Wood argued, pointing to the US newspaper industry and high-street music shop HMV as two businesses that did not see online competition coming and, as a result, were brought to their knees.

“In the short term, we overestimate what technology will do,” said Wood, with the result that, initially, it doesn’t live up to expectations. However, he added: “In the long term, we underestimate it.”

Wood outlined a possible future in which people were manipulated by machines. Powerful computers would be able to “make more and more accurate inferences” from the data people “leak” online. “Software will know how we can be exploited by carefully targeted approaches,” he said.

Such a situation is not so far-fetched. Even now, said Wood, “more advertising is going to Google and other internet search engines because they already know a lot about us. That’s why Google has attracted so much ad revenue – the adverts are



David Wood

Public domain

How to keep humans in the driving seat

shown only when they’re most likely to interest viewers. That’s just a foretaste of what’s going to come. As software observes us more and more – and sees which channels we click on – it will target adverts even better.”

He predicted: “Over the next five or 10 years, people are going to be alarmed about the ways in which they are manipulated by advertising.”

Politicians, said Wood, could “respond to public disquiet” by, for example, legislating against cookies on websites. But this “techno-conservative approach”, which sought to put a brake on technological progress,

“would be undesirable. I want to get to the things I genuinely want to buy more quickly.”

The solution, he argued, was to build “a human future with technology, rather than one in which the technology ran out of control – or one in which the politicians and other techno-conservatives took the innovation out of technology”.

Wood said he wanted a future with “humans in control, with technology that works not just for the vendor but also on the side of the consumer”.

The chair of the London event, consultant Katz Kiely, asked for contributions from

the select audience of technology and TV experts. Nigel Walley, Managing Director of media consultancy Decipher, argued that change in television rarely happened as quickly as technologists assumed it would.

He recalled that Anthony Rose, while heading the BBC’s iPlayer project, had predicted the rapid demise of linear broadcasting and its replacement by video-on-demand.

“Part of Anthony’s problem was that he was expecting things to happen too quickly,” said Walley. “As a technologist, he did not fully understand the social and human role that TV has.”

Technology, though, could make inroads into more surprising areas. “I can see a world in which scheduling decisions can be informed by data,” said Walley.

“I’m surprised that there isn’t an algorithm out there that has gone back through the last 10 to 15 years of Barb data and figured such things out,” added UKTV’s Simon Jackson.

Chris Waiting, from Associated Press, pointed out that computer algorithms already wrote news stories. “The algorithm can take a news story, find video clips and photos from an archive and assemble a one-minute package with a computer voiceover. Would you run it on *News at Ten*? No. Is it good enough to have on an app? Absolutely,” he said.

“News is pretty formulaic,” added Waiting, “but can you imagine a computer commissioning or producing a drama?”

“There are only seven plots [in drama],” reckoned Kiely. She asked: “At what point do we give a [computer] a plot, a number of characters and ask it to do all the things you have to do to write a good screenplay?”

Matthew Bell

Welsh broadcast media at risk?

RTS Wales joined the Institute of Welsh Affairs to host a lively debate on the future of Welsh broadcasting at Glyndŵr University in Wrexham at the end of October.

In a pre-recorded video message, the Welsh Government's Deputy Minister for Culture, Sport and Tourism, Ken Skates, expressed concern about the weakening position of broadcast media in Wales.

The RTS Centre's administrator, Hywel Wiliam, gave a brief overview of the key features of the current communications market.

The BBC Trust's Karl Davies argued the case for the creation of a discrete service licence for all of BBC Wales's output. Currently, its television services are part of the BBC One and BBC Two ser-



Ken Skates: sent video warning to RTS debate

vice licences. There was a lively debate about how the licence-fee regulations could be adapted to cover viewers watching BBC services online. Only two audience members said they were still watching live television regularly –

most claimed to be using on-demand services such as Netflix.

Wrexham is close to the border with England and research by Ofcom and the BBC has shown that many people in the town get their

television services from transmitters in England.

However, a straw poll of the audience showed that only two people were receiving their TV services from the North West and the point was made that, in this age of broadband connectivity, access to services was a matter of choice.

“Is there a future for broadcasting in Wales?” was also attended by media students from Coleg Cambria. Several of them had developed their own online video projects for social media platforms.

The event was chaired by Glyndŵr University's Graeme Park and recorded by students from the Department of Broadcasting and Journalism. An edited video of the discussion is being posted on the university's website.

Tim Hartley

ONLINE at the RTS

■ The awards season is fast approaching, and we've enjoyed sharing photos of the shortlisted RTS Craft & Design Awards nominees via social media. You can join the conversation, too, by searching for #rtscraft online.

It's time for the usually dressed-down RTS digital team to dust off our cummerbunds and ball gowns ahead of the ceremony, which we will be reporting live from Park Lane on 30 November.

The RTS website and our social media accounts are the only places to get the results as they're announced. We will also have interviews with the winners and other nominees. Fire up Twitter and follow @RTS_media now to ensure you don't miss a word.

We took advantage of the sell-out RTS/IET Joint Public Lecture to grab an exclusive interview with Google DeepMind co-founder Dr Demis Hassabis.

The all-round brainbox was fresh from his spellbinding lecture to the RTS on the future of artificial intelligence. He explains how his research will change the way we watch TV in “the next five years” by offering a smart recommendation service. He also reveals why he's such a fan of *True Detective* Season 1.

And, in case you missed his lecture, you can catch up on the whole thing now on our website (www.rts.org.uk/demis).

With news that Al Jazeera English is the latest news outlet to take the plunge with

short-video-sharing service Snapchat, we take a look at what the social-media platform offers news providers.

Is it just another digital fad or a useful way to reach a new, younger audience with quality news? Sandy Tabalo spoke to On-demand Output Editor at Sky News Alan Strange to find out (www.rts.org.uk/snapchat).

Following the success of our “Humans: anatomy of a hit” evening with Gemma Chan, Tom Goodman-Hill and others, we asked the show's writers to tell us what they're watching on the box right now. To give you a clue, it's not *Downton Abbey* (www.rts.org.uk/humans).

Last month, Pippa Shawley got the chance to interview

film-maker Sean McAllister at a London screening of his documentary *A Syrian Love Story*. He opens up about his “fly-in-the-soup” – rather than fly-on-the-wall – method of filming. He recounts how he followed one family's heart-breaking journey from stability in Syria to marital strife – and attempted suicide – in France.

McAllister has filmed in war zones around the world, but says he's most frightened of filming a documentary in his home town of Hull (www.rts.org.uk/mcallister).

If you have any thoughts about what we should be covering online, please contact Digital Editor Tim Dickens (TDickens@rts.org.uk)



Pat Younge speaking at Cambridge

Paul Hampartsoumian

London audits Cambridge event

London Centre's review of the RTS Cambridge Convention offered a lively discussion, with panellists clashing over the digital threat to traditional TV and the BBC green paper.

Pat Younge, the former BBC Chief Creative Officer who founded the indie Sugar Films earlier this year, predicted "a really turbulent period ahead. This Government is more radical than people understood."

Looking back to September's Convention, Younge

was left with the impression that television had become a "sunset industry. People still haven't really engaged with what digital means. We danced around it again [at Cambridge] but, at some point, we are going to address it head on, probably when we crash into it."

Nigel Walley, MD of media consultancy Decipher, took an opposing view: "In a way, it was the first post-internet Cambridge." Platforms and devices, he noted, were "almost invisible from the

debate", which had been about the "relationship between channels, studios and production companies.

"TV people have a handle on the strange new world of interactive digital media – to me, that was hugely positive."

Turning to John Whittingdale's Convention address, Toby Syfret from Enders Analysis recalled that the culture secretary had said there were no plans to privatise Channel 4. A few weeks later, Syfret added, "it seems to be rather high on his agenda. Never believe politicians, particularly when they sound reasonable."

Questions were taken from the audience. Peter Blackman from the Save Our BBC campaign asked the panel for its thoughts on the green paper on the future of the BBC, which was published in July.

Syfret said he found "the tone of the green paper misleading and unduly negative – it's about the need for reform rather than sustaining or improving". He was anxious about threats to the broadcast spectrum and the principle of universality.

Walley said that Blackman's organisation was "absurd". He added that the questions raised in the green paper, which also covered BBC funding, services and production, were "good questions to be asking in the 21st century".

Younge accepted that the Government had the right to ask the BBC questions, but said "the tone was unhelpful". He noted that "from a Tory secretary of state's point of view, having a fight with the BBC is not bad politics".

Five years of living in the US with its commercial TV model had taught Younge that "we put the BBC at risk at our cultural peril".

Younge also backed the BBC's new production division: "BBC Studios is absolutely critical if the BBC is to remain a world-class producer broadcaster. The current model, where in-house producers can only pitch their ideas to BBC commissioners, is out of date."

RTS online journalist Pippa Shawley discussed the Society's digital coverage of the Convention. This included an app that allowed voting during sessions. The RTS Twitter account proved popular, reaching more than 39,000 people on the Thursday of the Convention.

"We got beyond the bubble of Cambridge. During [BBC chief] Tony Hall's session, he was a trending topic on Twitter," said Shawley.

Matthew Bell

Sue Robertson, Executive Producer of the Cambridge Convention, chaired the London Centre event, which was held at New Broadcasting House in London on 7 October.

Bristol gurus share expertise

How to get that crucial foothold in the industry was the preoccupation of the audience for October's Bristol RTS Futures event held at Bath Spa University. Undergraduate film-makers and pupils from the city's Studio School quizzed a panel of seasoned TV professionals.

The panellists – BBC radio chief in the west, Stephanie

Marshall; Rob Hifle, Creative Director of BDH; editor Glenn Rainton; RTS-nominated cameraman and MD of Hurricane Media Jon Mowat; and George Panayiotou, Business Development Manager of Bristol post house Films at 59 – were candid about the challenges facing the students.

"It's difficult to stand out from the crowd," said Hifle,

"but concentrate on what you like and what you are good at. Don't try to be good at everything."

Marshall added: "Be persistent. If you send me a CV and ask for feedback, expect some feedback. And do watch or listen to the output. Don't go for an interview without knowing what we produce. Watch the content."

Mowat warned the audience not to exaggerate their experience: "Don't describe yourself as a director of photography just because you are proficient in using a camera."

But all the panel agreed that storytelling was the key thing for aspiring media professionals to master. They advised: be persistent, do research and make as much content as possible to shape and hone your skills.

Lynn Barlow

OFF MESSAGE

Christmas has come early at BBC Worldwide. Or it did for those hacks fortunate enough to attend the press launch of BBC Store, the corporation's long-anticipated, download-to-own service.

The journos were each given a generous £25 voucher towards their first purchases at BBC Store.

Such is the array of goodies available from more than 7,000 hours of BBC shows, spanning more than five decades, that Off Message is spoilt for choice.

Series one of the brilliant New Labour satire, *The Thick of It*, is a steal at £3.99, cheaper than a bottle of craft beer.

This is just the start. New content is apparently being added daily. Worldwide predicts that, within a year, some 10,000 hours will be on sale.

With luck, these additions will provide more archive fun for sports and current-affairs fans – neither of whom are particularly well served at the moment.

■ **Super brain meets super creatives...** Backstage at the RTS/IET Joint Public Lecture, given by the breathtakingly brilliant Demis Hassabis, were *Humans* co-writers Jonathan Brackley and Sam Vincent plus the show's Executive Producer, Derek Wax.

Were they discussing storylines for the second season of *Humans* with

Hassabis? Or maybe gaining private insights into all things AI?

Perhaps Anita/Mia, played by Gemma Chan, will reveal an aptitude for the intensely cerebral Chinese game of Go – unsurprisingly, a pastime enjoyed by Hassabis.

The DeepMind founder revealed that he is a fan of *Humans*. This would have pleased Channel 4 CEO David Abraham, who attended the sold-out lecture.

■ It was, of course, a good night for Channel 4 at this year's Grierson Awards, held earlier this month at London's Mermaid Theatre.

Grayson Perry – looking more outrageously flamboyant than ever – was voted Documentary Presenter of the Year for his stunning *Who Are You?*, an RTS winner back in March.

BBC Three, soon to be online only, pocketed two awards. Its imaginative drama-documentary, *Our World War: The First Day*, deservedly clinched the Best Historical Documentary prize.

At least the channel is going out with a bang, not a whimper. Let's hope that, in its new incarnation, BBC Three keeps innovating and isn't reduced to a digital also-ran.

■ **Some of you might think the last thing the world needs is yet another inquiry examining public service broadcasting.**

Not Lord Puttnam, who announced last month that he is chairing a panel looking at the nature, purpose and

role of public service television in the digital era. Goldsmiths, University of London, is behind the initiative. Its backers include the usual suspects, such as *The Guardian* – and, intriguingly, Vice, whose news coverage continues to give the established players a lot to think about.

The views of Vice's founder, Shane Smith, on the BBC and Channel 4 would be very interesting to hear.

■ Talking of news, it is far too early to assess the significance of ITV's rebooted *News at Ten*, anchored by the hugely engaging Tom Bradby.

For a start, news junkies must wait to see what impact Robert Peston makes as ITV News's new Political Editor when he finally arrives.

But the so-called "Battle of the Bongs" has led already to a less than gracious Huw Edwards taking to social media to claim that the BBC's ratings remain comfortably ahead of ITV's.

Surely, Bradby is right to encourage audiences to take a look at the relaunched *News at Ten*, which is trying to do something that is clearly new and different. As he wrote in *The Sunday Times*, "I would urge you to give us a try. I hope you will find us more thoughtful and a lot more engaging than our rivals."

This latest skirmish in the news wars between the BBC and ITV has a very long way to go before either side can claim victory.

Off Message hopes that John Whittingdale is paying full attention.



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