

# Television

October 2020



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everyone**



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## From the CEO



Autumn is well and truly here, though it is one unlike any we have experienced before. Thankfully, it remains the season for top-flight RTS events across the UK and for enjoying some superb television.

The opening session of the Society's Digital Convention provides our cover story. We were delighted that Tim Davie could make the time for an exclusive interview so soon after taking up his new role as Director-General of the BBC.

In our second Digital Convention session, Channel 4 CEO Alex Mahon

was in conversation with the inimitable Tim Hincks.

A huge thanks to both Tims and to Alex. Watch out for further RTS one-to-ones with industry leaders in the coming weeks.

We carry full reports of three more recent RTS events: "Defining diversity? That's easy"; "Winners, losers and own goals: Live sport in lockdown"; and "Making a drama out of a crisis", in which the great Richard Curtis reminded programme-makers that humour can be a potent weapon in television's approach to environmental issues.

Moya Lothian-McLean provides an inside account of how Channel 4's

flagship series *Adult Material* reached our screens. And Nick Frost tells Shilpa Ganatra how he was inspired to co-write and star in Amazon Prime's *Truth Seekers*.

Our TV Diary is written by former RTS bursary scholar Florence Watson, now working as a script editor at Sister Pictures. Matthew Bell's interview with S4C's CEO, Owen Evans (News, page 38), reminds us that there is so much more to wonderful Wales than choirs and rugby.

Theresa Wise

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We're looking back at our own story; the scoops, the interviews, the exclusives and the "and finallys", and we're kicking off an industry-wide debate about the future of broadcast journalism and TV production.

We'll also be hosting a special event in partnership with the Royal Television Society on the key questions and issues facing our industry. Details coming soon from the RTS.

**Be part of the story at [broadcastnow.co.uk/itn-65](https://broadcastnow.co.uk/itn-65)**

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# TV diary

**Florence Watson** is relieved that the magic of the writers room is still intact, even in the age of coronavirus



Something I have noticed about the Covid world is that everyone keeps using the phrase, “Time is meaningless”. January feels like a distant memory but, equally, I’m not sure how we reached October so fast. The amount of news we are having to absorb and then adapt to is unprecedented – and it shows no signs of letting up.

■ **Early last month, my landlord announced that they had decided to sell the home my housemates and I have been living in for the past three years. It’s sad because, during lockdown, I finally built up the courage to do all the DIY, deposit-nullifying projects that I never had time for before.**

I hate moving house and, in these stranger times, there is so much more to consider. With homeworking becoming the norm, it was important to find somewhere that would accommodate not only us (and our lockdown kitty, Oscar) but also impromptu office set-ups, desks, swivel chairs and walls thick enough to block out the sound of one another’s meetings.

■ During all this chaos, I started a new job, script editing on Sister Pictures’ new show *The Baby*, a horror comedy focused on motherhood.

It’s fantastic and, despite only ever meeting the team via Zoom, we have managed to create a dynamic that feels just as strong as any pre-Covid project.

If you have ever been in a writers room, you will know there comes a point when it’s hard to work out where your brain ends and everyone else’s begins. The characters live, breathe, love and die in this collective space.

It’s a type of witchcraft I wasn’t sure would operate between screens, but, having been through it, I am pleased to report that good ideas, talented writers and a brilliant showrunner (Siân Robins-Grace) are all it takes to replicate that magic, no matter the circumstances.

■ **I learnt last month that I have won a place on ScreenSkills’ Recalibrate mentoring programme, run by ThinkBigger! for women and disabled people who are at a juncture in their careers.**

My mentor is the awe-inspiring Anne Mensah, vice-president of original series at Netflix, who I will be getting to know over the next six months. And who knows, by the end we might even be able to meet in person.

■ Imposter syndrome has always been my biggest hurdle, and, without the in-person feedback you get in an office, sometimes it can be very easy

to let those thoughts overwhelm you. I joined the industry in 2017. As a working-class black woman from Liverpool, talent schemes have been my lifeblood.

The RTS bursary helped me through university. Since then, Channel 4’s Production Training Scheme and The Network scheme run by The TV Foundation have kept me working. I owe a lot to the people who held the door open for me at the start of my career. This month, I got to do the same as a member of the RTS Education committee.

■ **Each year, the RTS awards 30 bursaries to students from low-income families. As a former recipient, it’s a privilege to be part of the selection process. I am blown away by the talent and determination the applicants display.**

Now, more than ever, it is crucial that our industry opens not only its doors but its pockets to support them.

■ As the end of the year gets closer, and I settle into my new home with my work desk sat opposite my bed, I am hopeful that we will take the resilience and adaptability we learnt in 2020 with us into the new year – and time will start to have meaning again.

*Florence Watson is a script editor at Sister Pictures and former RTS bursary scholar.*



# COMFORT CLASSIC

It is hard to think of another great BBC sitcom blessed by such a strong pedigree as that of *Blackadder*. Running over four series, spanning 1983 to 1989 – plus the occasional special – the creators and stars of this comic masterpiece read like a roll call of late-20th-century British screen talent.

Richard Curtis, Stephen Fry, Hugh Laurie, John Lloyd, Miranda Richardson, Robbie Coltrane, Tony Robinson, Rik Mayall and Ben Elton were all, at some point, involved in the different incarnations of *Blackadder*. Not, of course, forgetting Tim McInnerny, cast as the wonderfully camp Percy Percy and Captain – cue double entendre – Darling.

At the heart of *Blackadder* was Rowan Atkinson, the preternaturally gifted actor who co-wrote the first series and starred as Edmund Blackadder.

The historical setting changed for each series and respectively took place in the 15th, 16th, 18th and 20th centuries. But from series 2, when writers Curtis and Elton came on board, Edmund remained essentially the same character – shrewd, conniving and totally devoid of scruples. Of course, his schemes invariably come hilariously unstuck.

Edmund's intelligence contrasts sharply with that of his dim-witted comic foil, Baldrick, played to perfection by Robinson, and Laurie's aristocratic numbskull, George, Prince of Wales in series 3, and Lieutenant the Hon George Colthurst St Barleigh MC in *Blackadder Goes Forth*. The absurdities of the English class system gave Curtis and Elton much of their inspiration.

What began as a medieval farce – well, sort of – set in the fictional age of Richard IV, and continued in the courts of Elizabeth I and the Regency, ended up in darker territory, when the First World War trenches gave some bite to the comedy.

At the culmination of the final series, *Blackadder Goes Forth*, Captain Blackadder can no longer avoid the inevitable and leads his comrades in arms over the top to almost certain death. Has sitcom ever been so heartbreaking?

Atkinson's relish at playing such a comic monster is a joy to watch. Most >



BBC *Blackadder Goes Forth*

## **Blackadder**

Costume comedy came of age in this milestone of mirth. **Steve Clarke** can't stop laughing

# Ear candy

of the best lines are his in scripts that fizz with verbal pyrotechnics and are crammed with sexual jokes, some of which might now be considered too boorish for our more woke age.

Throughout *Blackadder's* different reigns, the performers make everything look effortless as they deliver some brilliantly crafted lines heightened by superb comic timing.

What lay behind all this perfect tomfoolery, with its echoes of the music hall and pantomime, were years of hard graft, much of it spent at the Cambridge Footlights, the Edinburgh fringe and numerous BBC rehearsal studios, in TV and radio.

The matchless Lloyd, who produced all four series and collaborated on the scripts, served his apprenticeship as a radio producer in the 1970s before helping to nurture the comedy gold of BBC Two's *Not the Nine O'Clock News* and Central Television's *Spitting Image*.

*Blackadder* gave him what he famously described as an "epiphany". He was referring to the previously mentioned closing sequence of *Blackadder Goes Forth*. "It started out as a complete disaster because the plugs were pulled by the crew but, somehow, we got lucky and it turned into this amazingly moving piece of TV," he said. "It wasn't deliberate, it's just the way things turned out."

As for the banquet of quotable lines, is it an exaggeration to say that, like Shakespeare or Dickens, some of them have entered everyday speech? Side-splitting similes come thick and fast: "Baldrick, your head is emptier than a eunuch's underpants", "You're a girl with about as much talent for disguise as a giraffe in dark glasses trying to get into a polar bears-only golf club." Or he's "as cunning as a fox who's just been appointed Professor of Cunning at Oxford University".

Quite simply, *Blackadder* is smart British sitcom at its very best. No wonder the show was voted the second-best sitcom of all time, pipped to the post by *Only Fools and Horses*. Cunning plan, anyone? ■

**Blackadder Goes Forth is on-demand at UKTV Play.**



Audible Original

Norfolk's most notorious broadcaster, Alan Partridge, returns with a six-hours-plus podcasting odyssey into his inner mind. He has topped an illustrious career in news, chat and daytime shows, not to mention his stint on North Norfolk Digital Radio, with the conquest of a new broadcasting bastion: the podcast.

What he once assumed was the domain of "pale, tech-obsessed social lepers who couldn't get a platform on any meaningful broadcaster" has become his creative audio kingdom.

Stung by a Twitter troll who claimed they saw Partridge clip the wing mirror of another car, the erstwhile TV and radio host seeks to dispel such poisonous fabrications: "It's not just a lie. It's not just bull. It's libel."

Over the course of 18 episodes, he promises, listeners will learn about "the real Alan... his every nook and each of his crannies".

Recording in his rural oasthouse abode, he regales us with expert advice on everything from defaming people via their Wikipedia page to his pre-date grooming routine. On first dates, always be specific with your questions, he advises. "What are you up to in life?" is far too vague. Instead, he suggests asking something like: "What were you doing and where were you between the hours of 3:00pm and 5:00pm this afternoon?"

Whether it's the ear-worm theme song or the fake adverts interrupting each episode, the series is brimming with one-liners.

*From the Oasthouse* shows Armando Iannucci and Steve Coogan's marvelous comic creation at his tactless, incompetent and unfiltered best.

**Caitlin Danaher**



# WORKING LIVES



BBC

## Distributor

**D**istributor Jamie Lynn has been a fixture at the world's TV content markets for the past two decades. Fremantle's EVP head of EMEA distribution recently brokered deals for the upcoming BBC Three drama *We Are Who We Are* and BBC Two documentary series *Enslaved: The Lost History of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*.

### What does the job involve?

In its simplest form, distributors sell the international rights for programmes. Channels and platforms around the world cannot produce all their own shows, so they need to acquire content.

### Has the job changed over time?

Distribution used to be an ancillary part of the TV business, but it is now fundamental to how shows are funded and made. It's rare now, especially for

premium shows, that the commissioning broadcaster pays the entire budget. Producers need to bring partners on board early, including distributors, to make a show internationally viable.

So, we get involved at the earliest stage and have creative conversations about what we think will work around the world. This can lead to early support in the form of a pre-sale, or even co-productions, which can be effective creative partnerships and allow the scale and ambition of high-profile projects to be realised.

This has made my job that much more exciting over the past five to 10 years, as the industry has evolved.

### Is creativity ever compromised to make a programme more sellable?

No, I think the best work results from allowing the creator to make the shows they want to make. Lots of people were gunning for the rights to *My*

*Brilliant Friend*, Elena Ferrante's incredibly popular series of novels set around Naples, and there were producers in the States who wanted to set it in the US. But our partnership with HBO and RAI had it set in Naples – not only in Italian, but in the local dialect. Even in Italy, the show had subtitles. It is entirely authentic and Fremantle has sold it around the world.

### Surely, distributors can't concentrate solely on high-end dramas?

We've just sold Oscar-nominated director Luca Guadagnino's series *We Are Who We Are* to the BBC – this is high art on television. But Fremantle is also one of the world's premier gameshow and entertainment producers and distributors. We're a company with breadth and depth, which makes the job fun.

### How did you become a distributor?

When I was a kid, records and movies





*Enslaved: The Lost History of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*

BBC

**Has the lull in production boosted the market for older shows?**

The demand for classic programming was already growing with new platforms and services such as BritBox, Acorn and UKTV Play. It's been a good year for selling classic stuff, but it's not entirely coronavirus-led. The gaps in schedules due to production shut-downs are only starting to appear now.

**What makes a good distributor?**

You need to be curious and interested – and listen. You have to understand the challenges local producers face and their shows.

**What are the best and worst parts of the job?**

The best is when you know you've helped producers realise their creative vision, found an audience and got a success on your hands. A little bit of international travel is also great. Last week was "budget week", when I had to look at spreadsheets for hours on end. I understand its importance, but I'm happy when budget week is over.

**Are there any tricks of the trade you can share with us?**

Our former CEO taught me early on that going for the best financial deal is not always the right decision – finding the right home for a show will serve it better in the long term. Fremantle is still a company that believes in finding and connecting with audiences, which is why we work closely with public and free broadcasters, as well as platforms.

Recently, we've placed some great programmes with the BBC, including *Enslaved: The Lost History of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, fronted by Hollywood star Samuel L. Jackson. We could have sold it to a US streamer but, although this deal was harder to seal, it was better for the programme to not be hidden behind a paywall.

**What advice would you give to someone looking to work in distribution?**

Curious people get the most done. Passion is an overused and corny word but that matters, too, as do tenacity and resourcefulness. When you have to, you can learn how to write a programme contract and dissect a rights agreement, but the other traits are skills that have to be nurtured. ■

*Jamie Lynn, executive vice-president and head of EMEA distribution at Fremantle, was interviewed by Matthew Bell.*

were my obsession. I was a budding journalist in Canada, before moving to London in my mid-twenties, but I couldn't find work in music journalism.

I was hired by a PR company that represented international production companies, which sent me to Mipcom in Cannes. My eyes were opened to the world of television and I knew what I wanted to do. Soon after, I landed my first job in distribution, covering Asia for an animation company. Without planning it, I picked the right vocation. Lucky me.

**What was the first TV show you sold?**

I think it was a British animation series about animated ghosts to Hong Kong. I showed it to a broadcaster, pitched my heart out, and the buyer said he'd take it. I said: "Great, so you liked it." He replied: "Not really, but I liked your effort, so I'll buy it."

**What programme are you most proud of distributing?**

So many, but probably *Deutschland 83*, because it was such an unlikely mainstream success – we loved it from the outset and it came together so

beautifully. We had a few high-profile places interested in taking it, but chose the new Walter Presents service on Channel 4 here in the UK. The ratings and reaction were great, despite it being a German show in a prime-time slot usually reserved for the best of US drama – great kudos to Channel 4 for not underestimating its audience.

**Is it a glamorous life?**

There's a lot of pressure and it can be exhausting with all the travelling and juggling involved, but I'm not going to tell you it's not fun.

**Are you missing the TV trade shows cancelled as a result of coronavirus?**

I've been to Mipcom and MipTV every year since 2000. There's an immeasurable value in sitting with your clients and international partners, whether it's in Cannes or visiting them in their home territories. Now, we're using video conferences and it's worked better than I anticipated. But, trusted relationships are key to our business. Existing relationships are as strong, but I don't know how easy it will be to build new ones on Zoom.

To say that Tim Davie has hit the ground running is an understatement. In his first week as the BBC's 17th Director-General he delivered a remarkably candid speech setting out clearly his values and agenda. A fortnight later, he was the first speaker at the RTS's Digital Convention 2020, when he was interviewed by the Society's CEO, Theresa Wise.

Looking much younger than his 53 years, a consequence of his new buzz-cut hairstyle, the noticeably plain-speaking Davie cut a refreshing figure. He covered a wide range of topics, such as diversity, impartiality, competing with the tech giants, increasing revenue from the BBC's commercial activities, BBC pay and the corporation's important role as a global ambassador for Britain.

He also argued that the BBC's policy on abolishing free licences for those over-75s who do not receive pension credit was correct.

Throughout, he stressed that the BBC needed to be valued by all licence-fee payers, regardless of where they lived in the UK or their social class. "We've got to deliver for every household. Us offering value is not just a line," he insisted, mindful, perhaps, of his own background in south London, where he was the first member of his family to attend university. "It has surprised me that this has become part of me – focusing on making sure that every member of the public really gets value from us. That's what I'm about."

What does a modern public service broadcaster look like – and how does this differ from what the BBC has been doing to date, asked Wise.

"What I'm about is evolution, not trying everything out. One of my messages is that you have to evolve things to protect them."

He added: "I want people to think deeply about what's important in this market, what's important for us in the UK? What do people genuinely care about in the BBC?"

"There is good news for the BBC. In this world, I don't think there's been a better time for proper impartial news or proper local, regional storytelling.

"With such incredible competition, you can't take an audience for granted any more. The BBC has to be truly different and differentiated.



**Tim Davie** insists that the BBC must serve all licence-fee payers, regardless of who they are and where they live

# A BBC for everyone

"We're not trying to beat Netflix... It's about whether we are truly valued and essential, and whether the BBC feels indispensable – not for every hour of your media consumption but for part of it."

Were some audiences underserved by the BBC? "Absolutely. The BBC doesn't deliver equally to everyone. You're never going to quite get that right. There are some people who are getting extraordinary value from the BBC.

"The overall numbers are pretty good: 91% of the population come to

the BBC for an average of 18 hours a week. But there are certain bits of the country – and it's not as simple as age – that don't necessarily feel the BBC is for them. It's not as straightforward as saying, 'It's the under-35s'. It's often about your life circumstances, where you are, where you live..."

"The BBC is extraordinary in how it's connected with an enormous number of people across the UK. We've still got a real bedrock of support to justify a universal fee, but I did say [recently that] we don't have an inalienable right



to exist. That is under pressure. There are audiences that, in a diverse Britain, feel a little bit further away from us.”

How did he square the fact that he wanted the BBC to appeal to the whole of Britain while, at the same time, cutting 450 newsroom jobs in the English regions? Did he worry that some regions, such as the North East, might get left behind?

“You worry, of course, because you want to make sure you have the provision. By the way, local and regional programming is utterly critical to us.

“Let’s be clear, the metric here is not how many people we employ, it is the value to audiences. Every area of the BBC has to find efficiencies, which doesn’t mean I am diluting anything, it just means I am doing it better.

“There is a sense that the BBC could be more efficient in many areas – and it has done some good work, so this isn’t the new guy coming in and saying it’s all overstuffed with this, that and the other. The fact is that we’ve got a lot better over the years at being more efficient, but there are areas – and the regions is one of them.... A couple of facts: we will still have well over 2,000 people in the regional news group, where we do around 3,800 hours of coverage, which will remain the same.

“It’s not as if we’re going to be a small player. I would like to look at local news provision as part of the 2022 discussions [concerning the next five-year licence-fee settlement] to say, ‘Going forward, how could that evolve?’

“This is not just about the slow stripping of areas, I think we can grow.... More than anything, it’s about audience value. I want people in the North East to feel the BBC is for them.”

Turning to diversity, Wise said that CEOs everywhere were striving to improve the diversity of their workforces in terms of minorities and socio-economic groups. How would Davie effect real change in this regard at the BBC?

He emphasised that “talk is cheap”, and that action on greater representation of disadvantaged groups at all levels of the BBC was essential. “One of the things that everyone in this industry should do is go back and read the speeches from 10 years ago. It’s a sobering experience.”

He added: “There’s been incredible progress on-screen but internally

– and senior leadership is critical to this – progress and the speed of change has been slow.... Talking bluntly, a lot of people lower down the organisation look at it and go, ‘Great intent, but I can’t do that’ or, ‘I don’t really believe it’s going to happen....’

“This is mission critical. Everything that goes on at the BBC – including editorial decision-making – is utterly dependent on having a truly diverse team. I was very blunt in my first words [to staff]: don’t hire in your own image and there can’t be a ‘BBC type’ or we’re in real trouble.”



Tim Davie (right) being interviewed by Theresa Wise

RTS

Davie said he intends to create a “50-20-12 organisation”, a reference, respectively, to the proportion of staff who are female, from BAME backgrounds or are disabled.

He added: “Truly, it’s about leadership and accountability. I have been very direct with BBC leaders and told them they will not get promoted without us assessing how happy their staff are and how they’ve delivered against diversity targets.”

On the problem of the gender pay gap that has caused great controversy at the BBC, he indicated that there was more work to do, but it was wrong for the BBC to beat itself up on this issue “when we’re often a lot better than the [rest of the] industry”.

Wise pointed out that Sarah Sands, who left the BBC this summer after editing *Today*, recently criticised what she said were the huge differences between producers’ and presenters’ salaries. What did Davie think of this discrepancy?

“As CEO, there will be presenters

earning more than me, but that’s normal in the TV world. We could name a number of other [industries] – finance, football – with [high pay for some talent]. It can sometimes be a bit uncomfortable, but we’re trying to get value within a market. We don’t exist fully in a bubble....

“We try and get a discount [but] we want to pay fairly. And there is a market. I recognise the dynamics of this, but I don’t think the solution is to say, ‘We’re going to equalise pay between different job types’. That doesn’t work for me.”

A less contentious area for the BBC is the so-called “soft power” that it wields on the global stage, which the corporation has argued is even more vital in the era of Brexit. Did Davie agree?

“It’s never been more important,” he said. The unique strength of Britain’s creative industries was “not a random occurrence”: it depended on public interventions, exemplified by the BBC, and successful commercial businesses, such as Sky.

“Sky’s is an incredible model, and part of that is [due to] our reputation across the world for trusted content and quality, and, specifically, the BBC, with 468 million weekly users of our content.... One of the things the BBC stands for [globally] is trust and very-high-quality content. I think other companies benefit from that.... We are thankful for some government investment [Foreign Office funding for the World Service]. We’d like more in this area and that’s what we’re trying to do. We’re trying to build it.

“I would love to see 1 billion people ▶

## Lessons from the crisis

**Q Theresa Wise:** Will the changes to the BBC's way of working due to the pandemic lead to lasting change?

**A Tim Davie:** The learnings we're getting from Covid are such a strange combination. Stating the obvious, we won't be in a position where everyone is coming in five days a week. We'll have more flexible working patterns and be thinking about how we use our buildings differently.

We are a production business and a news operation so, at the end of the day, we need people in, but we'll take some learnings. I suspect a lot of leaders have found that Zooming all day is exhausting, but the ability to do Zoom calls with 1,000 people...

I hate doing video calls but I can't see myself not using Zoom and other things like it in the future.... As the BBC, we'll try and capture some of that best practice quickly....

There are all kinds of things we've learned that we'd like to replicate and there are some costs to be saved there.

I'm hoping we leap forward, take the best of it and get rid of the worst of it very quickly.



BBC

Strike: *Lethal White*

› coming to our services weekly. The data is very compelling. If people connect with the BBC and Britishness – all those terms are loaded, but [I mean] Britishness around the world – they are more likely to trade with us....

“This is not without jeopardy. If you look at what governments around the world are doing, investing in creative clusters, investing in our industry, they want to grow share.

“On my watch, the BBC has to be part of a successful, growing creative industry and not just winning for itself. That's really important to me. I think people who know me, [know that] I was interested in growing the radio market, growing the television market. I want the market to grow. It is really important the BBC does that in the right way.”

What were the priorities for the BBC increasing its commercial revenues? “Now we've got the production base of BBC Studios, are we firing on all cylinders across all genres? I think we've made great progress. We're writing lots of business in natural history.... Growing our business as a creative force around the world is really powerful.

“I think the migration from linear to on-demand says, ‘OK, how do we begin to get into direct-to-consumer services in the right way?’

“That's difficult, because, if you don't generate a lot of profit short term, [you can] build that for the long-term future of the BBC. We've seen [it] with BritBox

[in North America]: we sold a third-party investment to AMC. Now we've got ourselves a nice business there.

“There are real opportunities across many of our fronts to look properly at [direct-to-consumer] businesses and there might be other areas – I've got some thoughts in my head that I'll keep to myself – where we could get growth.”

As for securing and retaining talent in competition with Netflix et al, whether that be for writers, actors or other performers, Davie said the key word for the corporation had to be “focus”.

He accepted that the BBC was not going to have all the most expensive talent in the world but argued that it was uniquely placed to grow talent. “I think we are a force for good. I personally like working in a place where there is purpose. I care about this place, I like working here.

“We do something different. I am not going to compete on exactly the same territory. There's no point. We want to grow talent and be differentiated and be more BBC, rather than less BBC. There's an obsession with copying other people but you won't beat them on their terms. You've got to win on your terms.

“People ask, ‘Is it a winnable battle?’ Of course, it's a winnable battle if you focus. We've done a bit of that with BBC Studios. We certainly do that in the UK across a lot of the BBC's output, but we could do better.”





Once Upon a Time in Iraq

BBC

In his debut speech as DG, Davie told the BBC to “champion and recommit to impartiality”. Many people believe the BBC is shaped by particular perspectives – so what was he planning to do to change this? “It means that, together, we renew our vows on impartiality.

“By the way, before we go completely over the top here, I would defend the vast majority of BBC output. I think we do a brilliant job of delivering impartial output in terms of the left/right axis...

“I do think there is something about metropolitan-based organisations, or the way you hire, that can somewhat feel a bit distant from some of the population. And it’s not about left and right. It’s more complicated than that.

“It’s about, ‘Do I feel it’s for me?’

There, I think we’re in a challenging situation if we want to deliver impartiality. More and more people, especially young people, are struggling with the idea. They’re surrounded by everyone having an opinion.

“This changes the grammar editorially because, when [an interviewer] is

asking a question someone might suggest that this is not because they want to get to the truth but because they’ve got a partisan view.

“Part of what I was trying to do in that speech [on 3 September] – and I think it is needed – was to say, ‘OK, do we really believe it’s deliverable?’ And I do.

“I know that, short-term, you could get more Twitter followers by being outrageous, but there’s a bigger purpose than that. Longer-term, it will put us in a stronger position.

“We really need to get excited about impartiality and finding truth, evidence, testimony. I was very clear that, if you’re not passionate about that, you’re in the wrong place.” ■

**Report by Steve Clarke. Tim Davie was in conversation with Theresa Wise at the first session of the RTS Digital Convention 2020, sponsored by YouTube, on 17 September. The producers were Helen Scott and Sue Robertson. View the full video at: [bit.ly/RTSdavie](https://bit.ly/RTSdavie).**

## Davie’s video and audio fixes

‘I am a very heavy consumer of radio. My tastes are eclectic. I am not saying that just to be diplomatic. I listen to a lot of sport, *Test Match Special*, that sort of thing.

‘Over the weekend, I listen to 6 Music; Radio 4 during the week. I’ve always been a fan of radio drama. I’m a little bit nostalgic about some of the comedies on 4 Extra.

‘On TV, it’s a classic mix. *Once Upon a Time in Iraq* is a must watch. I love good documentaries. Like everyone, I’ll escape into the dramas. I’ve been enjoying *Strike: Lethal White*.

‘Now, of course, I get quite a lot of recommendations from the shop floor, so I’ll be doing that.’

# Channel 4 rises to the challenge



Channel 4

**T**hey say that times of crisis often bring out the best in people and organisations. For an example of this, look no further than how Channel 4 has adapted to postponed productions and an alarming fall in advertising over the past six months.

“In a crisis, when you have to change really fast, Channel 4 is actually amazing,” the broadcaster’s CEO, Alex Mahon, told Tim Hincks, co-CEO of Expectation, at the RTS’s Digital Convention.

As lockdown took hold in March, almost overnight around 1,000 members of staff began working remotely. “We were prepared with the technology. We had a debt facility in place for a market shock. That helped,” she recalled. “We had to make a plan to cut costs fast.

“We had a clear, strategic conversation about what the editorial response should be, led by Ian [director of programmes Ian Katz] and the commissioning team. What did we want to say to the nation and what did we think our position was?

## Alex Mahon, the broadcaster’s CEO, praises the UK’s indie sector for riding to the rescue in lockdown

“It was clear to us that we should say something back to Britain about what was happening. It was the exact opposite of what the SVoDs would be doing. If you were watching Netflix, it would be *Tiger King*, which was not saying anything about Britain or the pandemic. *Tiger King* didn’t bring people together to face an unseen enemy.”

With advertising revenue falling dramatically, Hincks asked if the beginning of lockdown was a scary moment? “Yes, it was pretty bad.... In the worst months, advertising dropped 50%. To have 50% of your revenue ripped away and not know how long that would last was bad.”

Fortunately, despite a hefty cut to

the content budget and furloughing around 100 staff, Channel 4’s commissioners and the UK’s indies rose to the occasion. Innovative, fast-turnaround shows, such as *Grayson’s Art Club* and *Jamie: Keep Cooking and Carry On*, soon found an audience as people, unable to leave their homes, needed diversions.

“Indies did incredible things and produced things cheaply,” said Mahon, who claimed that Channel 4 was more in tune with the nation’s mood than its rivals were.

Viewers, particularly the under-35s, flocked to Channel 4, including to the highly regarded *Channel 4 News*. The number of young people watching Krishnan Guru-Murthy, Cathy Newman and Jon Snow increased by 79%, according to Mahon.

It also helped that, back in the early spring, Channel 4 had planned for the worst possible financial scenario, which, in the event, didn’t happen – “so we are up compared with where we thought we’d be”.

Further lateral thinking was required to film its flagship show, *The Great*



## 'YOU CAN'T COMPETE [WITH] NETFLIX OR DISNEY+ BY JUST MAKING EVERYTHING CHEAPER'

*British Bake Off*, a tent pole of the autumn schedule. Love Productions created "a self-contained biosphere" for the six-week shoot – in other words, baking in a bubble. Last month, *Bake Off* gave Channel 4 its highest audience since 1985, as an average of 10.8 million people tuned in.

As for the next six months, Hincks asked whether the broadcaster could maintain its programme budget. Did Channel 4 have the resources to allow those programmes to continue or will we see a chipping away and producer's tariffs going down?

"The programme budget will go up massively next year because we've had to cut it so much this year," replied Mahon. "It's not clear yet how much of the £150m we took out [from a total of £650m] will go back in, because we don't know what the advertising market will do."

She continued: "There's also a bit of a concertina effect because of things that have been delayed.... We've got to get tariffs back to normal rates. We can't survive, and neither can indies, with tariffs being low."

"Lockdown has definitely taught us some things about how we can make cheaper programmes and it's definitely taught us some things about how we can make faster decisions."

"But you can't compete in a Netflix world or an Amazon Prime world or a Disney+ world by just making everything cheaper. It's not realistic, because that's not the quality that viewers demand and it's not an option that producers have."

Noting that the BBC's new Director-General, Tim Davie, has said that the BBC may produce less in future, would

it be better for Channel 4 to make fewer shows in order to push tariffs back up?

Mahon stressed that, in such an uber-competitive landscape, audiences demanded big shows such as

*Bake Off* and *Gogglebox*. "We've been seeing that trend for years but, equally, we've been seeing new stuff as well."

For new shows, marketing – often on social media – was critical for Channel 4, with a younger audience than the other British public service broadcasters.

Mahon highlighted a recent deal with social network company Snap, which involves cut-down versions

of 300 shows on Snapchat's Discover platform. "They will have a reach of five, six, seven million [people]," predicted the CEO.

Hincks turned his attention to competition from the SVoDs. Could Channel 4 compete on scripted content with Netflix et al? "You can't compete at the same budget point.... but you can definitely compete on new writers, new directors and on new and important work." Mahon cited two upcoming dramas as examples of Channel 4's commitment to new work: *Adult Material* (see page 30), focused on a woman who works in the porn industry, and Russell T Davies's latest series, *It's a Sin*, set during the 1980s Aids pandemic.

"I don't think the streamers would make them. They wouldn't find the people to do them. We've got to keep doing that because this is what stimulates the new work in the industry and early-stage writers.... The streamers are looking for stuff that's much more global or [written by] proven writers. There's a space for us, but it's not easy to compete with them." >



Tim Hincks

## Progress on diversity

**Q Tim Hincks:** The UK PSBs are run by white people. Can you effect real change with white people in charge? If not, what do we do?

**A Alex Mahon:** If you wanted my successor to be not white – or the successors of those who run the other PSBs – is there a strong enough field? And, if there isn't, what are we doing to develop that?

You can campaign very, very hard as a CEO to have an authentically representative group of people in the organisation. What's great about Channel 4 is that it's the only place where it's written into the remit. It's a core part of my job, which is why I am so focused on it. I really care about it. My job is to ensure that there is a strong field of people who can run the organisation after me.

That's quite hard to do, because you have to go all the way down the pipeline and start from scratch. There is structural racism, structural sexism in the industry, without a doubt. For us, that's why there's a focus on the numbers.

My aim is to get to 20% BAME [representation] across the organisation – but, most importantly, to get to 20% BAME in our top 100 highest-paid jobs. I'm obsessive about it. I'm at 14% in the top 100 and 17% across the organisation.



The Great British Bake Off

Channel 4

## Lessons from the crisis

**Alex Mahon:** ‘I was amazed by how Channel 4 and everyone adapted so fast. Things you would have thought would take five years happened overnight.

‘We’ve become more location agnostic about where jobs are. We’ve got five locations. We’ll start to think more about what jobs can be done where – do we need to be in a specific location? We were already on that journey... it’s good because it means we can represent the UK better.

‘Regarding pitching, it’s become more democratic when indies have had access to us through Zoom, as opposed to having to get on a train and come to a meeting and be kept waiting in reception.

‘On Zoom, you get your time slot and, regardless of where you are coming from, be it London, Middlesbrough or Newcastle, you get exactly the same access.

‘We’ve had great feedback from indies. They call it the geo-leveller effect. Also, people turn up on time for meetings and leave on time.’

› But, probed Hincks, weren’t the streamers parking their tanks closer and closer to British lawns? After all, Netflix’s *Sex Education* could easily have been a Channel 4 show. “We jointly funded *The End of the F\*\*\*ing World*. *Sex Education* is a brilliant show but purposefully omni-place. There’s room for both. Sometimes we will overlap, particularly if it’s a young-adult piece.”

Channel 4’s position as a state-owned PSB makes the broadcaster vulnerable to certain ministers’ fascination with privatising the station. At the end of last year, relations with the Government entered a tricky patch when *Channel 4 News* replaced Boris Johnson’s vacant seat with a melting ice sculpture for a party leaders’ debate on climate change during the general election campaign.

Hincks asked how Channel 4 was getting on with the Government today. “What we’ve found during the crisis – and you’ll hear this from other broadcasters – is that the DCMS has been incredible, the Government has been very supportive and responsive.

“We’ve had this massive insurance scheme launched, the biggest globally, to help the industry get back to work. We’ve been working super-closely with DCMS and it has thought through how to help the industry as much as possible.

“They’ve been much more considered about what the industry needs

than [similar] governments in many other countries.”

Hincks asked what Channel 4 wanted from Ofcom’s delayed review of public service broadcasting and whether the UK PSBs, all facing competition from streamers, were becoming closer.

On the PSB review, the Channel 4 CEO said she wanted three things: legislation to ensure PSB prominence on all platforms; regulation for the tech companies, which would mean they had to compete on the same terms as the PSBs; and a change in how Ofcom measured Channel 4’s performance to account for its growing digital presence. Mahon claimed that All 4 had done better even than Netflix during lockdown.

As for the PSBs being more collaborative, Mahon said that this had manifested in making joint submissions to Ofcom and the DCMS, and working together on BritBox.

She added: “The days of us all doing things separately, and feeling like we were fighting each other, have gone.” ■

*Report by Steve Clarke. Alex Mahon, CEO of Channel 4, was in conversation with Tim Hincks, Co-CEO of Expectation, as part of the RTS Digital Convention 2020, sponsored by YouTube, on 28 September. The producers were Sue Robertson and Martin Stott. View the full video at: [bit.ly/RTSmahon](https://bit.ly/RTSmahon).*





Hayley Squires as Jolene in *Adult Material*

Channel 4

# Porn unwrapped

**F**or a show that feels so now, *Adult Material* has been a long time in the making. It is nearly a decade since writer Lucy Kirkwood first thought of penning a story that would pull back the curtain on the mysterious world of the British pornography industry. Now, her vision has been fully realised as a four-part drama series.

*Adult Material* has a lot riding on it, in every sense. Belief in Kirkwood's work is such that the show has become the flagship programme of Channel 4's highly anticipated 2020 autumn season, a gaudy gem in its crown.

But those tuning in to see a lascivious romp will be wrong-footed; after the first episode aired earlier this month, several viewers expressed surprise at the darkness immediately on show, with intense scenes featuring rape and even a murder. *Carry On*, it ain't.

Instead, what Kirkwood has created, alongside director Dawn Shadforth and an ensemble cast led by

Channel 4's powerful drama *Adult Material* was created by an all-female team. **Moya Lothian-McLean** reveals how they did it

Hayley Squires as Jolene Dollar – an adult actor at the “top of her game” – is an uncomfortable, probing and darkly funny examination of power dynamics and consent. Some people will not be ready for it. Many thousands more will.

“*Adult Material* on Channel 4,” a friend texted me, as the first episode drew to a close. “AMAZING.”

“We don't give people answers,” Hayley Squires tells me, of her role in the series, which has already been deemed “career-making”. “We give them viewpoints. We allow them to make their own mind up”.

Fate brought Squires and Jolene together: Sheridan Smith was

originally lined up to take on the role but was forced to exit the series due to scheduling conflicts, so Squires stepped up.

What drew her to the show, I ask? Complexity, apparently. Kirkwood sent her some scripts and a giant research treatment containing nine years' worth of investigations into the porn industry and the storylines that had been born out of it.

“It was a huge document,” Squires remembers. “It talked about all the complexities of the show and her research and the character arc of everyone in it.”

“It was the complexity of the character, the humour of her, the very detailed and complex ways Lucy had told this story without being in any way prescriptive or a mouthpiece for her own opinion [that made me want the part].”

While Squires remains tight-lipped about the exact ins and outs (forgive me) of *Adult Material*'s plot line, she is happy to share a broad-brush sketch of the bigger picture. “When you first meet Jolene in episodes 1 and 2, she's >



Tamika Ramsay as Sabelle in *Adult Material*

Channel 4

› at the top of her game,” Squires says. “Legendary status. She projects this air of being in control and having all these plates spinning, that she’s fully aware of the industry and the people she shares her life with, both professionally and personally.

“Then she meets Amy, who comes to set for the first time. Something horrific happens to her on her first day of shooting. And Jolene takes it upon herself to take this girl under her wing, and go on this campaign for justice, which means that they’re taking on her closest colleague and the very large corporations that she’s been working with for a number of years.”

This is apparently when it all starts falling apart for Jolene. She is forced to confront trauma from her past and the looming threat of the all-powerful, international porn studios that blur the lines between what is empowering and what is exploitative.

She risks losing “everything”, including her children, Squires explains. But Jolene does not yield. “She believes in something, even if she’s not coming to terms with why she’s doing it.”

Although *Adult Material* was in development years before the likes of Michaela Coel’s *I May Destroy You* and

## ‘IT IS ABOUT THE PARTICULAR WAY THE BRITS MAKE PORNOGRAPHY [AND] THE BRITISH CLASS SYSTEM’

Lucy Prebble’s Billie Piper vehicle *I Hate Suzie*, comparisons have already been drawn. All three handle difficult conversations about complicated women, agency in a patriarchal world and how power fluctuates in different contexts. It’s no coincidence that they are programmes created by women.

“It couldn’t have been made any other way,” says Shadforth, of the quartet of women creating and leading *Adult Material*. Her colleagues agree.

“What’s really standing out is that these stories have not [previously] been told by women,” says Channel 4’s head of drama, Caroline Hollick, who worked with Kirkwood and Shadforth throughout *Adult Material*’s development process.

“When we were working on the scripts and the edits, I was really aware how rare it is to see honest, unvarnished stories about women and sex and to see women making decisions that are uncomfortable and unconventional.”

Both Hollick and Squires say there was an aim to remove *Adult Material* from the “male gaze”. “This show was fundamentally made by the female gaze,” observes Hollick. There’s an incredible male contribution to the show but the lead actor, the writer, the director and the DoP were women. That feels like something that would have been harder to achieve 10 or 15 years ago.

“What you get with the shows [such as *I May Destroy You* and *I Hate Suzie*] coming to the fore now is that there’s a generation of female film-makers who are coming to their peak and that’s why you’re getting these shows happening at the same time, because these women are not afraid to tell the truth about uncomfortable realities,” says Hollick.

She admits that, at times, during the development process of *Adult Material*, she found those realities just too uncomfortable. This resulted in stand-offs with Kirkwood about removing





Siena Kelly as Amy in *Adult Material*

Channel 4

was considered so filthy. I like to think we're in that tradition but also that this is an incredibly modern show, reflecting who we are today."

Modern, indeed: an "intimacy director" – now ubiquitous in the industry – was on set to choreograph all sex scenes, something that "just makes sense", says Squires, for whom *Adult Material* was her first time filming scenes of that nature. "Talk about in at the deep end!" she laughs. But she describes the experience as "comfortable", thanks to scenes being so carefully worked out between the actors and movement director Alex Reynolds, whom Shadforth worked with on *His Dark Materials*.

Consultations with adult stars themselves also heavily informed the work. On top of Kirkwood's nine years of research, porn star Rebecca More, aka one half of the infamous Cock Destroyers, was on hand to provide advice and insight to both the actors and the development team. She stressed the large role that social media now plays in the careers of porn stars.

It is reflected in the finished product – the very first scene opens with Jolene faking an orgasm for her Twitter followers (a platform her loving partner maintains for her). It is a key revenue stream for adult actors in 2020, who gain far more agency (and opportunities to profit) from independently made digital content than from films produced for studios.

*Adult Material* is not going to be for everyone. Some will shy away from the truths it uncovers about an industry that, despite being more normalised than ever, still operates under a veil of protective secrecy. But the series offers no easy answers and nor do its creators want it to.

They are just hoping that people will join them on the journey and be open to the difficult themes it confronts – and how that might cause audiences to reflect on their own judgements, lives and workplace relations.

But the one thing Hollick most wants to stress as our chat draws to a close is that, "it is incredibly funny. That will surprise people. There were jokes that we just sat in the edit rooms and laughed out loud at. I miss those script meetings so much.

"The show is just really funny, even if it's difficult to watch at times, when some shocking things happen. It's really entertaining. I want people to ride that wave all the way through." ■

some of the more controversial decisions that Jolene makes.

There would be late-night emails about editing out certain scenes. But Kirkwood and Shadforth pushed back, the scenes stayed, and Hollick says she realised that they were right.

"I'd never seen a show like this before," she explains. "Sometimes, you do lose your bottle. But you have to remember, as a commissioner, you're not automatically right."

Making *Adult Material* changed her profoundly, Hollick says. "I'd always seen myself as a pretty modern, feminist kind of person. But what I realised was that I am just as uptight and middle class and judgemental as the next person.

"Some of the arguments I had at the start of the script came from my old-fashioned feminism, where I thought, 'Well, we can't put this

character through this. That's not a feminist thing to see happen on screen.' And that was where I was completely wrong."

Although *Adult Material* had already been commissioned by the time Hollick joined Channel 4, it became her passion project. It was classic Channel 4 in its lineage.

"I don't think Netflix would make something like this," she says. "This show is British to its core. It is about the particular way the Brits make pornography; it's about the British class system as much as anything else.

"Channel 4 has a remit to push boundaries, to innovate, to reflect lives that don't get seen on screen. And to be really bold. I'm old enough to remember Michael Grade being referred to as the 'pornographer in chief' because Channel 4's material

# A writer who 'dabbles' in TV

Mike Bartlett explains to Caroline Frost why the characters in the *Doctor Foster* spin-off, *Life*, are an antidote to social divisions



Mike Bartlett

Daniel Hambury/StellaPicsLtd

**W**hen Mike Bartlett sent actress Victoria Hamilton the script for his latest television series, *Life*, she felt a bit confused at first. “I was reading this wonderful character Belle, and I suddenly thought, I know this woman! I emailed Mike and told him she really reminded me of Anna, my character in *Doctor Foster*. Mike sent me back a very short email, ‘Yes, it is Anna. Anna Belle.’”

And that is how viewers will jump from the claustrophobic, bitter world that Bartlett created for two series of *Doctor Foster*, to the far broader canvas of *Life*. The freshly named Belle is one of the main characters. The series follows the lives of the residents of a large house in Manchester divided into four flats.

The good news is that, for the tiny number of drama fans who didn’t tune in for the battles, betrayals and devastating denouement of *Doctor Foster*, *Life* offers a completely unique universe that they will understand and enjoy.

There won’t be many of them, of course. *Doctor Foster*, with the Bafta-winning Suranne Jones at its centre, increasingly batty decision-making by all its protagonists and *that* dinner party, became must-see viewing for

audiences of more of than 10 million by the second series, a phenomenon that surprised even its creator.

“As a writer or showrunner, you like to think you have things within your control but, when that happens, it’s all luck – that people loved the character, in terms of Suranne doing it, that it hit a moment,” Bartlett remembers. “It’s one of the reasons that I wanted to do television, to draw in all sorts of different people, from teenage girls to older men. It was amazing that it happened.”

Why then, out of all the memorable characters he has created, did he choose Anna-turned-Belle to take us all on another dramatic turn?

“In the second series, Anna suddenly says, ‘I’m leaving’, and that surprised

me,” he explains. “I thought, who does that? She seemed to be starting a new story and I wondered about a woman in a marriage for 15 years with a big drinking problem, who suddenly breaks out of her marriage and her suburban life and starts again, at that age. What does that mean for her? It left a big question mark that I wanted to explore. That felt like a really exciting story that I wanted to investigate.”

“Plus, I wanted to write more for Victoria Hamilton in that part. I’ve worked with her a few times and I wanted to write something she could get her teeth into on-screen.”

The house’s other residents include Alison Steadman as Gail, taking stock of her life on the eve of her 70th birthday in the shadow of her hectoring husband, Henry, played perfectly by Peter Davison. There’s also Adrian Lester as David, happily married to Kelly (Rachael Stirling) but troubled by the attentions of his student Saira (Saira Choudhry). Meanwhile, on the ground floor, Melissa Johns plays heavily pregnant Hannah, navigating the attentions of safe and stable Liam (Joshua James) with the return to the scene of the baby’s father, Andy, played by Calvin Demba.

The idea for such a narrative set-up had been bubbling inside Bartlett for the past three years, inspired by his

**‘THERE’S A HUGE AMOUNT OF “SNARK” ON TV AT THE MOMENT... GETTING LAUGHS FROM HOW AWFUL PEOPLE CAN BE TO EACH OTHER’**





Alison Steadman in *Life*

BBC

own experience of living in a divided house in London. “It always amazed me that we were all one stud wall away from each other without really knowing what was going on around us. We’d meet in the corridor and not exchange two words. You don’t know these people, and yet you sort of know everything.”

There are enough twists and surprises in each of the stories to keep a drama fan happy but, for Bartlett, *Life* is also a way of expressing how he feels about the collapse of modern society and, in some senses, community: “The fact that people still crave it and they still find it, reaching out and helping others.”

Bartlett agrees that the themes of loneliness and the hope of starting over are very strong in the series. “Those, plus our desires and difficulties in reaching out and connecting with each other. I think that sums up life in a city, and life itself. No man is an island and yet we are all islands. That’s the essential challenge of life.”

Since getting his break as a playwright as one of the Old Vic’s New Voices in 2005, Bartlett has enjoyed huge success in theatre, culminating in his Olivier award for *King Charles III*, subsequently adapted for both radio and television.

His versatility is proved by his credits, which range from *King Charles III* to

an episode of *Doctor Who*. He still describes himself as a “playwright who dabbles in TV”, although the success of *Doctor Foster* must surely tempt him to stick with the small screen.

He says not. “For me, it’s always been about starting completely over again. Each piece of work is new, even the second series of *Doctor Foster* is darker, the scenes longer and the style more intense. I have to approach it like that to keep me interested. I like to think of myself as an artist, and that means doing what you do, and if people go for it, brilliant, but you can only do what feels right.”

Such a philosophy must have helped to deal with the relative lack of acclaim or ratings that came his way for *Press*, his 2018 BBC One series set in the world of two rival London newspapers gunning for readers, political leaks, celebrity scoops and each other’s staff. Despite such heady fare, *Press* didn’t pull in a *Foster*-level audience and was cancelled after one series. Bartlett today remains disappointed but sanguine.

“Rationally, I know that if I said I’m pitching one show about a woman seeking revenge for infidelity and another one based around journalistic procedure, you don’t have to try too hard to work out which one’s going to be a hit.

“I watched a bit of *Press* recently and I was proud of it. If I did it again, I’d give it more juicy human drama, but, equally, I was trying to make a show about quite a niche world for a very broad audience and, given where TV is at the moment, that’s quite hard to do. I was disappointed that it didn’t find that audience, but that’s the way it goes.”

*Life* poses no such niche difficulties: a house full of intergenerational residents and their increasingly entangled dramas seems a gift for any writer, but Bartlett explains why, to him, it feels quite radical.

“There’s a huge amount of ‘snark’ on TV at the moment, people getting laughs from how awful people can be to each other, and this is a show that explores the difficult things people are having to face every single day, what that feels like, and to celebrate their strengths and faith in who we are.

“That feels radical because, if you go online, that’s not what you see. There, everyone is polarised, so sure of themselves, putting up amazing photos, and I think that’s not the reality of life. I want to show that real people are brilliant. That wouldn’t have been a political thing to say 20 years ago, but now it is. We can’t keep dividing ourselves from other people. We can be better.” ■



From left: Emma D'Arcy, Nick Frost and Samson Kayo in *Truth Seekers*

Amazon Prime

# Ghostbusters for the online era

**T**o those who know him, it is very on-brand that Nick Frost's new sitcom is a paranormal romp, relentlessly firing out jokes while two ghost hunters uncover spooky goings-on in their house-to-house investigations.

A mild obsession with the extraordinary is in Frost's creative DNA. His preoccupations, along with those of his best friend, Simon Pegg, were evident in his *Spaced* days: the cult Channel 4 series often made passing reference to zombies and conspiracy theories.

"When we used to live together, we spent some evenings going out ghost hunting," Frost remembers. "We'd get in his car and we'd find an old Saxon church somewhere in Essex, and spend the evening creeping around the cemetery.

"One time, when we lived in

**Nick Frost reveals how he helped create Amazon Prime's new supernatural sitcom *Truth Seekers*. Shilpa Ganatra gets goosebumps**

Highgate, there was a forest at the back of the house that we'd never really walked around. After an afternoon of heavy drinking, we decided to break through the trees. We found a pristine 1940s train platform, with the lights on and a waiting room.

"At that point, we were so freaked out: we thought we'd uncovered a supernatural train platform in the forest.

We found out later that it was part of [a line to Alexandra Palace] that they shut [in 1970], but that feeling of being exhilarated and terrified and letting your mind wander never left us."

Frost is speaking from the offices of Stolen Picture, the production company set up by him and Pegg after a run of successful movies together that included zombie movie *Shaun of the Dead* and off-beat cop comedy *Hot Fuzz*.

His new sitcom, *Truth Seekers*, is Stolen Picture's first project for television. The eight-parter revolves around widower Gus, played by Frost, who is a YouTube paranormal investigator and, by day, a broadband installer at Smyle – tag line: "Connecting worlds".

Through his job, he meets new recruit Elton (Samson Kayo, familiar to fans of *Famalam* and *Timewasters*). As they make visits to eerie houses, they stumble upon paranormal activity that



leads them to a major conspiracy led by the sinister Dr Peter Toynbee (*The Mighty Boosh*'s Julian Barratt). Emma D'Arcy (*Wanderlust, Hanna*) joins the investigators as Astrid, and Susan Wokoma (*Year of the Rabbit, Porters*) plays Elton's troubled sister.

The horror-comedy is in the vein of *What We Do in the Shadows* and *Dead Set*, but it is the characters' human stories that sets it apart.

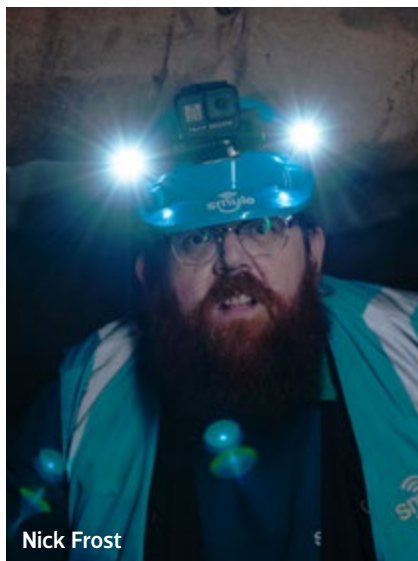
"As much as it's about a gang who find each other and stumble across a conspiracy, it is also about their loss: they're all missing something and trying to find something, too," explains Frost. "Gus is trying to find his wife, literally. Astrid is trying to find the truth about what happened to her and who she is, and Elton is trying to find a way in which he can live and not be in the shadow of his sister and her problems.

"You could take out any mention of the supernatural, and there'd still be a comedy about people struggling to make their way. It's a difficult thing, to be human these days."

Though the real-life escapades were Frost's and Pegg's, the idea began with Frost and his writer friend James Serafinowicz (brother of actor Peter and brother-in-law of *Father Ted* writer Graham Linehan). Once Stolen Picture was formed in 2016, Frost, Serafinowicz and Pegg brought in Nat Saunders, who created and wrote Sky One's *Sick Note* with Serafinowicz, to complete the creative quartet for *Truth Seekers*.

Each initially wrote two episodes. The foursome then went through them together, aligning and adjusting where needed. It might sound like a reasonable plan but "the scripts were massive and long, and some of them were technically difficult and unfunny", concedes Frost. "And there were four of us, with four separate versions of what we thought was funny or frightening or tragic. It was a difficult way of doing it."

It worked out in the end: the series is lean and engaging, with a smart balance of comedy and horror. Frost gives dues to the creative atmosphere of a writers room. But he also notes that he started and finished a film script for Orion ("a funny slasher movie about a family who hire an Airbnb on a remote



Amazon Prime

**'I NEVER WANTED TO BE AN ACTOR. IT'S AWFUL... I'M ANXIOUS JUST TALKING ABOUT IT'**

Swedish island") in just six weeks during lockdown.

"It was just me on my own, and no one telling me what to do or how to do it," he says. "I think, with films, it still goes through the editorial process, but there are fewer voices."

Amazon Prime Video picked up *Truth Seekers* in what sounds like an unusually smooth process. "I haven't felt more supported by a team in terms of their commitment to the show, and their commitment to us as creatives," says Frost. "Their notes were few but smart. I learned quite a long time ago to not be a snob when it comes to your writing.

"When Simon Pegg and I wrote *Paul* [about an alien on the run in modern-day America], there were a few times when we got notes back from execs and I got really cross that they didn't understand our vision. But I learned from that process that maybe it's not them, maybe it's the script.

"It's good to listen to notes from people who are going to spend millions bankrolling your show, because some of them might be pretty good."

Frost's propensity to accept feedback is aided by his on-the-job training.

*Spaced*, co-starring Pegg and Jessica Hynes, was his first proper acting project, though you'd barely guess it from his on-screen appearance as Mike, the military-obsessed best friend.

It was in 2011, with *Paul*, that Frost began writing. Two years later, with the last of his and Pegg's so-called "Cornetto Trilogy", *The World's End*, he expanded into producing.

Though his acting credits include the Hollywood biggie *Cuban Fury* and fantasy drama *Into the Badlands*, he claims that he is still an apprentice: "I don't think I'll ever be the finished article, in terms of acting. I always wanted to be a writer or a painter, but I never wanted to be an actor. It's awful, I find it really difficult. I'm anxious just talking about it."

Because of his own unconventional route into the world of entertainment, Frost needs no reminding of the need for different voices in television. He is actively seeking greater diversity for Stolen Picture, though he admits that it is not easy to find new talent from a range of backgrounds.

"I think everyone in the industry is aware about what we need to do," he says. "Our voice isn't necessarily the one that everyone wants to hear nowadays – it shouldn't be four white men in a room making television for everyone.

"I was very lucky. I got a chance and it was either this or I was going to be an area manager of a Chiquito restaurant, so I took this. But everyone's got a story. Just because you're a poor kid or a single mum, your story is still as valid as what I decide to write, or what anyone else decides to write."

His next job is to get back on set to complete *The Nevers*, the HBO sci-fi drama spearheaded by *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* creator Joss Whedon. Though production halted during lockdown, Frost is looking forward to returning to the fold: "I'm still a fanboy, and to have him direct me... there's still a part of me that squeals inside and thinks, 'That's the man who invented Buffy!' It's more anxiety, to be back acting, but I'm happy that I get to do it with one of my heroes." ■

**Truth Seekers will be available on Amazon Prime Video from 30 October.**

# 12-15 October

## RTS Midlands

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	12:30-1:15pm	How to kick off a career in sports broadcasting
	1:45-2:30pm	Is TV somewhere you can work if you have a disability?
	3:00-4:00pm	ScreenSkills CV masterclass
<b>Tuesday</b> 13 October	10:00-10:45am	How to make a brilliant podcast
	11:15-12:00pm	Filming with a smartphone
	12:30-1:15pm	Working in the locations department with Film Birmingham
	1:20-2:10pm	Freelancing: ask your questions on how to operate as a freelancer
	1:45-2:30pm	Top tips for a career in digital effects
3:00-4:00pm	Ask me anything – with experts from across the industry	
<b>Wednesday</b> 14 October	10:00-10:45am	Ask us anything... about entertainment and comedy
	11:15am-12:00pm	The Doctors will see you now: Live from the home of BBC One soap <i>Doctors</i>
	12:30-1:15pm	In conversation with Fiona Campbell, BBC Three
	1:20-2:10pm	Freelancing: ask your questions on how to operate as a freelancer
	3:00-4:00pm	CV masterclass with BBC experts
<b>Thursday</b> 15 October	10:00-10:45am	Post-production: is this where the magic of TV really happens?
	11:15am-12:00pm	Working in news – is it the toughest gig in TV?
	12:30-1:15pm	In conversation... with Jed Mercurio
	1:45-2:30pm	Animation workshop: the world of animation is brought to life by our experts
	3:00-4:00pm	Innovation Showcase

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# OUR FRIEND IN IRELAND

The past six months have been a period like no other in Ireland. Our lockdown has been followed by a partial lifting of restrictions that has us bobbing up and down between level two and level three of the pandemic regulations.

The good news is that production has resumed, and it is slightly surreal that Matt Damon, star of *Contagion*, a spooky thriller about a deadly virus and a global panic, has been spotted pottering about in Dalkey, a small seaside town south of Dublin, where he chose to spend lockdown.

He's here, along with Jodie Comer, Ben Affleck and others, to star in Ridley Scott's latest movie, *The Last Duel* – put on hold for a while, but now up and running again.

Also steaming ahead, following an enforced pause, is *Foundation*, a sci-fi epic for Apple TV+. It is the largest production ever undertaken in this country. The producers are using Troy Studios in Limerick, the biggest in Ireland. For the nerds among us, *Foundation* is based on a pathbreaking trilogy – long considered to be unfilmable – by Isaac Asimov, a giant of sci-fi, whose influence is found in everything from *Star Wars* on up.

Another major production under way again in County Wicklow is Netflix's *Vikings: Valhalla*, a spin-off from the successful *Vikings* series shot for the History Channel.

All of these big productions have meant welcome and much-needed work for local crews, technicians, actors and musicians. At the other end of the scale, unfortunately, it is

Agnes Cogan reports sightings of Matt Damon as filming resumes across the country



Agnes Cogan

a different story. For independent production companies, the past six months have been devastating, “a horror show” in the words of one independent producer. One of our biggest and (usually) most successful production companies has seen its staff reduced from a peak of 580 less than a year ago to just seven.

Some productions have had the agility to adapt to changed conditions and new protocols, but some, by their nature, cannot. Sports events are happening again but, without “gates” and crowds of fans, the atmosphere is sadly lacking.

Fun in a time of lockdown was hard to come by, but RTÉ, Ireland's national broadcaster, succeeded in launching a *Comic Relief Telethon* when

such a notion seemed unthinkable. This effort raised €6m for charity, an enormous sum for a population of just under five million people.

The most successful segment of the night was a satirical sketch riffing on *Normal People*, starring not only *Normal People* actors Paul Mescal and Daisy Edgar-Jones, but also Andrew Scott, *Fleabag*'s hot priest! No wonder it went viral.

*Normal People*, the drama based on the 2018 novel by Sally Rooney, was, of course, the hit of the lockdown; it would have been the water-cooler topic *du jour* if only we'd had water coolers to go to.

Viewing patterns changed profoundly as streaming made more inroads. For TG4, Ireland's Irish-language TV service, this was nothing new, since it had pioneered streaming way back in 2002, long before most people had ever thought of it. TG4 now serves an unexpected global audience for Irish-language programmes (with subtitles).

All broadcasters have taken a huge financial hit and have had to find ways of providing a service adapted to the new requirements of a changed TV landscape.

From the huge undertaking of adapting Asimov's *Foundation* for the TV screen, to the nightly spectacle of people talking to us from their homes, often with unscripted interventions from barking dogs and playing children, the TV community has had to get used to a whole new way of doing things.

And it's not over yet. ■

**Agnes Cogan is Chair of RTS Republic of Ireland.**



The Good Life

He namechecked a few of his favourite environmental dramas, including 1985 BBC thriller *Edge of Darkness*, Steven Soderbergh's biopic *Erin Brockovich* and Sky Atlantic's recent drama *Chernobyl*. But, he added: "The show I'd like to see back is *The Good Life*, a TV programme about people trying to do the right thing environmentally, and what a struggle and how comical it was.

"There is a sort of ordinariness about the environmental battle, which is there in our day-to-day lives."

Curtis enjoyed TV success with *Blackadder* and *The Vicar of Dibley* before moving into movies and creating huge hits such as *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Love Actually*. He was speaking at an RTS event that looked at how TV comedy and drama can address environmental issues in a less contrived and sensationalist way. "At every level in our business, domestic and political lives, the environment is a big old theme. I don't think [a drama] always has to end in a nuclear explosion.

"We should remind ourselves of how wide [environmental] issues are. It's deforestation, water, plastics, fish, animals, recycling, energy – it doesn't always have to be a cataclysmic breaking of the ozone layer, as entertaining as that might be."

Curtis pointed to recent research commissioned by the environmental charity Global Action Plan, of which he is a patron. This shows that more than three-quarters of young people in the UK want to see TV drama address environmental issues.

"We've not passed the need to educate because that's always there... but, in a way, this is the moment for drama to take over," said Curtis, who was talking to Jeremy Oppenheim, the Chair of Global Action Plan. Also present were Georgia Wagstaff, Bethan Moore, Sophie Marsh, Jack Stanley and Amy Harris, five young film-makers hoping to making environment-themed, entertaining TV drama. They are the finalists in Global Action Plan's "Flickers of the Future" film competition (see box on page 19).

The second half of the RTS event saw environmental journalist and broadcaster Lucy Siegle, of the BBC's *The One Show*, chair a discussion on how television can better reflect environmental issues.

"The environmental movement has been stunningly good at telling us, if you want to listen, about the [climate] disaster that is playing out," said

# More laughs, less dystopia

Programme-makers who tackle environmental issues are urged to avoid sensationalism, hears the RTS

Television cannot be accused of ignoring the environment. Our destruction of the planet has long been a staple of serious TV documentaries. And in drama, zombies, pandemics and nuclear catastrophe offer stark visions of our future if humanity fails to mend its ways.

According to Richard Curtis, however, environmental programming doesn't have to be "boring, didactic or terrifying". The UK's king of comedy reckoned it can also be "funny, interesting, educational and personal".

BBC



Oppenheim. “Our greatest skill has been to tell this bleak, terrifying future... [But] we’re desperately in need for the creative sector to turn this on its head and tell the stories about a future that we need to build together.”

“Ideas and good storytelling,” are key, said Carnival Films head of production Charlotte Ashby. The UK drama specialist makes *The Last Kingdom* for Netflix and ITV’s *Belgravia*.

“Just as the HBO comedy series *Six Feet Under* broke a taboo in tackling the topic of death, head on and with humour, it will take the right stories in the right hands to make content that tackles [the environment] that audiences want to watch,” argued Ashby. “To tell a positive story of a sustainable future, you need to work hard to find an angle, a source of conflict, drama or jeopardy.”

One potential solution, she said, was to “tell personal, relatable stories that confront but, at the same time, entertain with irreverence and humour”.

Environmental content in drama and entertainment is thin on the ground. A 2019 report from Bafta’s environmental project Albert, “Subtitles to save the world”, analysed subtitles to assess how well TV covers the environment.

“Across a whole year’s worth of broadcasting content, BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Sky together mentioned



Richard Curtis

Global Action Plan

‘climate change’ 3,000 times, which is the same as ‘urine’ and ‘zombies;” said Aaron Matthews, Albert’s head of industry sustainability.

The situation is improving: a follow-up report will “show that ‘climate change’ is now talked about four times more than it was the previous year, but that only puts it on a par with ‘discos’ and ‘bikinis’. What does that say about an industry of public service broadcasters who talk about bikinis as much as climate change?”

Matthews said that *Coronation Street*, *Emmerdale* and *EastEnders* had all run environmental storylines. “It was also interesting to see climate change running as a theme throughout Michaela

Coel’s *I May Destroy You*. We’re getting there, but there are [only] a handful of instances.”

Siegle asked whether TV shows that addressed environmental issues more positively could reduce viewers’ eco-anxiety. “Mental health and the environmental crisis are interlinked,” said Addy Raja, a film producer and NHS junior doctor. For the younger generation, in particular, he said, “there is a feeling of hopelessness and being disenfranchised” – yet this was a generation that wanted to change things. TV dramas often portrayed “a dark, dystopian future and that... causes eco-anxiety”, he argued.

“I’m seeing evidence of stuff in our shows where [environmental] issues are tackled on a granular, real level,” said Sky Studios director of comedy Jon Mountague, whose recent successes include *Brassic*. “Comedy, in particular, relies on taking down big targets, and what better target [could you have] than anti-environmentalism?”

“Were a show such as *The Good Life*, or something more overtly around environmental issues, to come around, we would absolutely do it.” ■

**Report by Matthew Bell. ‘Making a drama out of a crisis’ was held on 1 October, and produced by the RTS, IJPR and Global Action Plan.**

## Flickers of the Future sheds light on alternate worlds

Global Action Plan’s film competition, ‘Flickers of the Future’, asked young film-makers to create a human story of a sustainable future. The five finalists – who came up with some quirky, interesting ideas – will pitch their shows to UK broadcasters.

Georgia Wagstaff has devised *Planet B*, in which a hapless young man stumbles across a planet-sized secret. Bethan Moore’s *Keepers*, a romantic comedy set in the near future, revolves around competitive bee keeping.

In Sophie Marsh’s *Cross the Line*, one woman must work with her alternate self to create a greener future before their worlds disappear. Jack Stanley’s series, *Natural Causes*, is set in an eco-conscious UK, in which a group of teens try to help their terminally ill friend offset her life by erasing her carbon



footprint. Amy Harris’s *Cheesed Off* foresees a world where animal products, fossil fuels and plastic have been outlawed, and rehabilitation is required for

those who still harbour old destructive habits.

Screenwriter Richard Curtis was impressed by the finalists’ imagination. “Start as you mean to continue. My funny career has gone from writing short sketches and then using that skill to do a sitcom, and now my films use the same skill,” he advised.

“Write what you’re passionate about, rather than what you think you ought to address... look at your own experience and life. The big secret of writing is to write stuff that’s interesting to you and moves you.

“When I started writing on *Not the Nine O’Clock News*, we were given a list of things that were funny – British Rail sandwiches, trade unions. I didn’t think any of them were funny, so I wrote what I thought was funny.”

# Defining diversity: More than a numbers game

ITV press advert  
published on  
19 September



## An RTS panel raises some big questions concerning the TV sector's inability to foster a genuinely diverse workforce

If you thought that defining diversity was easy, think again. As the chair of a stimulating and thought-provoking RTS event, Aaqil Ahmed, formerly the head of religion and ethics at the BBC, concluded: "Diversity in itself is diverse. For me, that understanding of it isn't there for a lot of people.... It's not a numbers game... diversity is very complicated."

Throughout the "Defining diversity? That's easy" session, attempts to provide a definition that all the panel could agree on proved elusive.

Cat Lewis, CEO of Manchester-based

Nine Lives Media, said one of the best definitions she had seen was in ITV's anti-racist advertisement, published in response to the Black Lives Matter routine performed on *Britain's Got Talent* by dance troupe Diversity. "It said: 'We are changed by what we see just as we are changed when we are seen.' That's so true – to achieve it, you need to see it."

There was, however, a consensus among the speakers that urgent work was needed from the top, whether it was government, Ofcom or a new body set up to ensure that the television sector finally effected real and lasting change on this most pressing of issues.

Only then would the industry be likely to recruit and retain staff from a wide range of backgrounds that truly reflected British society.

"It's not something that should be in the hands of individual broadcasters," said Ahmed, himself from a northern, working-class background, who was the first in his family to attend university.

Marcus Ryder, former head of current affairs at BBC Scotland and visiting professor at the Sir Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity, said: "Ofcom needs to define diversity and to set minimum standards for the broadcasters that it regulates."



Creative strategy consultant Ally Castle, a former programme-maker, BBC audience insights expert and specialist in representations of disability, thought it was vital that the regulator did this in collaboration with the industry. “Yes, there are moral, commercial and creative cases for diversity but it’s the people on the ground who are the decision-makers and they need to support it,” she said.

Dr Clive James Nwonka, a fellow in film studies at the London School of Economics, said that, following the Black Lives Matter protests across the globe, the film and TV sector needed to translate its own reaction to George Floyd’s murder into policy and practice.

He said this would “require a coalition of stakeholders and sectors across film and TV coming together in a community of ideas to see how their different interests and investments in diversity can work in a holistic industry approach.

“What that looks like, I am not sure. I do think there needs to be some sort of consequence for failing to meet a target or a percentage or adhere to a particular standard. Without these, it is difficult to implement any long-lasting change.”

Ahmed said it was vital that broadcasters and companies based outside London, particularly in the north of England, recruited locally – and, in doing so, fully reflected the ethnic and social make-up of their areas.

“When you look at the move to BBC North and Channel 4 to Leeds, you know who the diverse groups are in those areas and expect to see them working for broadcasters in those areas.”

Nwonka explained why it was important for TV companies to take local demographics into consideration when conceiving and implementing diversity schemes. He said: “Percentages and targets are useful initially, but they can’t be the long-term solution. You need to go deeper and look at how different demographics exist in different areas of the country.”

Ryder agreed that the data used to measure diversity was often something of a blunt instrument and ignored key information, such as the level of the jobs that people from minorities were employed in.

“We take it for granted that, when we talk about 20% or 30%, we know what that means,” he said. “That’s dangerous. One of the ways we measure regional diversity is to look at

percentages of salary spend. Yet, when we talk about 20% or 30%, it seems we’re talking about headcount.... We need to unpack what we mean by some of these percentages.”

One company – praised by Ryder – that has done pioneering work in hiring people representative of their local area was Nine Lives Media.

The company’s CEO said she was more optimistic than Ahmed about British TV’s progress towards employing more people from diverse back-

## ‘THERE NEEDS TO BE SOME SORT OF CONSEQUENCE FOR FAILING TO MEET A TARGET’

grounds. “I genuinely think things are getting better.... Thirty-odd years ago, schemes were introduced to train diverse people to come into the industry and many independents didn’t do anything about it.

“Now, broadcasters are saying to independents: ‘We expect you to be genuinely diverse in your programme-making and have diverse teams on- and off-screen.’ Broadcasters themselves need to ensure they are retaining people from diverse backgrounds and not having the revolving door and glass ceiling problem.”

She agreed that reflecting the different demographics of the UK in local workforces was important, especially since ITV was no longer a regional network of separate, often powerful, companies.

The decline of northern ITV franchise holders, such as Granada, Yorkshire and Tyne Tees, had changed the sector’s class profile. Lewis said: “The consolidation of television in London has meant that, as an industry, it has become very upper middle class. When I started in telly as a 16-year-old at Tyne Tees Television, it was full of working-class people.”

Regarding disability, Castle said there had been a lot of frustration over the BBC’s 12% target because it was “so much lower than the national representation of working-age disabled adults, which is around 17% to 19%.”

According to data published by Creative Diversity Network’s Project Diamond, which measures the number of people from minorities working in British TV, Castle said the overall figure for disabled people in the sector was “roughly around 5%.”

Again, however, there was a problem with defining disabled. “Everyone who has a disability has a very different lived experience of that disability,” noted Castle. “We don’t mind the term because there has to be an umbrella term for people who are disabled but, within that, there has to be an acknowledgment that there is a huge spectrum of experience.”

Lewis noted that the on-screen representation of disabled people was inadequate. She praised Tim Davie, the BBC’s new Director-General, for backing a “50-20-12 organisation”, referring respectively to the proportion of female staff, those from BAME backgrounds and people with disabilities. “It’s good leadership to be giving that message to the industry.”

Ahmed was more sceptical. He said that the BBC’s 20% target for BAME people was problematic because it was too general: “It’s not British Asian or British black – it’s black, Asian and minority ethnic. You could come from anywhere in the world and be included in the percentage.”

Nwonka agreed. He said: “We need to think more about British non-white identity as being crucial to inclusion.” He regarded diversity as “the management of difference in institutional cultures”.

The academic added that his and other researchers’ work suggested that part of the problem in defining diversity was that it was usually powerful, white, middle-class men who decided at a particular moment what diversity was. They also decided which “diverse” groups were included in the various diversity initiatives.

“It’s really dangerous to think of diversity as an all-encompassing, everyone can be included at the same time to the same degree [concept]. It’s not, but is completely contingent on how individuals feel at different times.”

Defining diversity is simple? Hardly. ■

**Report by Steve Clarke. ‘Defining diversity? That’s easy’ was an RTS event held on 22 September. The producer was Angela Ferreira, Managing Director of Douglas Road Productions.**

# Why Netflix has no rules

Simon Shaps reviews Reed Hastings' new book  
– and divulges what happened when he was  
headhunted by the streaming giant

**C**andour is a big deal for Netflix co-founder and co-CEO Reed Hastings. Having argued for “increased candour” early on in this eye-popping account of Netflix’s corporate culture, he returns to the idea some 60 pages later in a section called “Pump up candour”. Not content with that, he makes the point again, towards the end of the book, with the exhortation: “Max up candour” (Chapter 8).

So, in the spirit of pumping up my own candour, I should confess to a dalliance with Netflix. Back in 2014, I received a call from a headhunter asking if I was interested in a senior job at Netflix. A year earlier, the company had launched *House of Cards*, so Netflix already felt like the place to be in television.

I was given a job spec, which, to my eyes, contained nothing out of the ordinary other than that candidates were required to have mastery of PowerPoint (I certainly knew someone who could do that for me), Excel (I definitely knew what that was) and Word (bingo!).

I was invited to Paris for an interview, as the executive I would be working for was there for the launch of Netflix in France. This was before Netflix launched in 130 markets on a single day, a feat it pulled off early in 2016.

I then went to LA for a day of interviews, one every 30 minutes, with an assortment of people from across the organisation. Back in London, I spoke to the head of HR, who called me from somewhere deep in the heart of Silicon Valley.

*No Rules Rules: Netflix and the Culture of Reinvention* by Reed Hastings and Erin Meyer, is published by Virgin Books, priced £20. ISBN 978-0753553633



Then nothing. I learned, once again, that silence is indeed the American way of saying no.

Reading this fascinating account of how Netflix does things differently, not merely in the way it has revolutionised television, but as the employer of 8,000 people around the world, I now realise, all these years later, that its business model and its corporate culture are different sides of the same story. The overused term “disruptive” does not do it justice.

During my day in the LA office, I had casually asked questions about holiday policy, and commissioning authority, which produced answers that made it abundantly clear that Netflix was different.

The company is not alone in seeking to recruit the brightest and the best, to achieve what Hastings calls “talent density”, shedding adequate performers

**‘THE OVERUSED TERM “DISRUPTIVE” DOES NOT DO NETFLIX JUSTICE’**

as well as “jerks” along the way. Unlike others, it also believes in offering higher pay than its direct competitors. Once in place, these star hirings are left to make big bets.

These bets can be multi-million-dollar commitments. This was the case, for example, with documentary head Adam Del Deo’s decision to buy *Icarus* for \$4.6m in January 2017. Apparently, his boss, chief content officer Ted Sarandos, simply told him to “swing big” if he thought it was going to be a hit. That was it. No business case or ROI analysis before the decision was taken.

To Del Deo’s relief, the film eventually won an Oscar. Too many big bets that don’t deliver lead to a quick exit, or, as Hastings puts it: “Adequate performance gets a generous severance package.”

So, back to my question about holiday policy. I was told that Netflix had no rules around vacation. Instead it expected employees to use “good judgement” about the amount of leave they took. On the question of who needed to sign off major commissioning decisions, I was told that up to 10 people across the organisation would weigh in.

My interpretation: nobody took any holiday because there was peer pressure to work long hours, with perhaps a couple hours off after lunch on Christmas Day. And on the signing off of new commissions, frankly, it sounded nightmarish. Who were these 10 people? Did they read scripts? How long did they take?

This book reveals I was wrong on both counts and I am sure my scepticism showed.





Netflix's policy on holidays is designed to create a culture where employees are encouraged to "do what's right for the organisation". The "no vacation policy" is not a "no vacation" policy. On the contrary, top executives, from Hastings and Sarandos downwards, deliberately talk about their, often exotic, trips to "set the context" for everyone else.

With expenses, the same principle applies. There is no finely tuned expenses policy or approvals process. Employees are again expected to use their own judgement about what is necessary, and to "act in Netflix's best interests".

Around the time that the "no rules" rules were being introduced, David Wells, a senior finance executive, took his seat in economy on a short flight to Mexico, only to discover the entire

Netflix content team sitting in first. Wells was surprised by the behaviour and the content team wondered why a senior executive was travelling economy.

The system is built on the notion that you need to give employees freedom to act, rather than exercising top-down control. In the case of the first-class tickets to Mexico, or lavish entertainment generally, individuals will nonetheless have to be prepared to justify the expense, and show how it was in the best interests of the organisation to fly first or order six bottles of vintage claret. There may well be perfectly reasonable business arguments for both.

On the commissioning process, the "10 names" are not other people who might second guess Adam Del Deo's intention to acquire *Icarus* and the unprecedented amount of money he

proposed to spend. Instead, executives are encouraged to "farm for dissent" – seek out people who might challenge, or test out a decision – and "socialise the idea", which means "taking the temperature" in the organisation about what is proposed.

The decision-maker is the person closest to the creative pitch and, as "the informed captain", is encouraged to make the bet.

If it succeeds, Del Deo or anyone else is encouraged to celebrate the success (but perhaps not with vintage claret). If it fails, the onus is on the decision-maker to "sunshine" the decision. In Netflix language, that means talk openly about the thinking behind the decision and offer a detailed explanation for what went wrong and what has been learnt from the experience.

At the end of 2018, Sarandos was congratulated on the huge critical acclaim for *Roma* and the ratings success of *Bird Box*, which was viewed by a record 45 million subscribers in its first week. Sarandos's response was that it wasn't his decision to pick the two films. Instead, he explained, he picks the pickers, who, in turn, pick the films, in what he calls a "hierarchy of picking".

After shadowing Hastings for a day, Sheryl Sandberg, the author and Facebook executive, told him: "The amazing thing was to sit with you all day long and see that you didn't make one decision"

Hastings and Sarandos hunt for talent, provide the essential context – what Netflix wants to achieve and how it operates – and then encourage their teams to take countless big swings. At the same time, they relentlessly seek out feedback on their own performance (some of it is quoted here and is not very pretty) and they make it their business to listen to feedback about employees across the company.

Netflix, in this account, is no easy ride. It is relentless in searching out great content, growing its worldwide subscriber base and further improving its technology. It rewards its employees well but, in return, it has sky-high expectations of them. ■



England player Ben Stokes contributed to Sky's lockdown replay of the 2019 Cricket World Cup

Getty Images

# TV sport reboots

**O**n 12 March, Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta tested positive for coronavirus, sending his team and staff into self-isolation.

The following morning, the Premier League threw in the towel – it was obvious that it was no longer possible to play football during the Covid-19 epidemic.

The rest of football and pretty much all sport followed. At a stroke, the schedules of the UK's specialist sports broadcasters had been emptied.

At an RTS event in late September, some of the leading figures in sports broadcasting recalled the day the coronavirus lockdown brought down the curtain on live sport.

"It was a moment that had been coming," said Sky Sports Managing

## The RTS learns how the health crisis is nurturing innovation in TV sport

Director Rob Webster, looking back to the March lockdown. "Our Italian colleagues were ahead of us in terms of the virus and their sport. It was only a matter of time.

"We'd done as much planning as we possibly could, but I don't think anyone could have been fully prepared for that moment – and the realisation that we had 11 sports channels dedicated to live sport when there wasn't going to be any live sport [to show]."

Sky Sports took the decision "pretty much on day one, to allow our customers to pause paying us", said Webster.

"We stopped taking money from pubs and clubs." It also decided to keep all its sports channels on air. Now it had to fill them.

As did BT Sport. "It meant intense and quick decision-making," recalled Simon Green, head of Sky's UK rival. "We'd lost all our live sport and we realised that we had an awful lot of time to fill across our schedules."

At Sky Sports, Webster said that reinventing archive content was critical: "If you're rerunning classic matches in your schedule, and that's really all you can do for a period of time, you've got to make them as exciting, compelling and fresh as possible."

The broadcaster aired "watchalongs", classic clashes that included England's last-gasp victory in the 2019 Cricket World Cup. "We managed to get Ben

Stokes, Eoin Morgan and Jos Buttler talking through what was happening [as we] played out the final.”

Digital services company NTT Data normally works on sporting events such as the Tour de France (delayed until late August) and the Open golf tournament (which was cancelled this year). The company’s UK sports innovation lead, Silvia Di Gregorio, told the RTS event: “We all wanted to keep the fans’ experience alive – [and make it] richer than ever, due to the circumstances.”

For Sky Sports, NTT produced *The Open for the Ages*, a virtual tournament featuring 21 of the world’s greatest golfers from the past 50 years, using data analysis, a fan vote and archive footage to find a winner for a fictional Open at St Andrews.

NTT is not directly involved in sports production; its role is to enhance the viewers’ experience. For *The Open for the Ages*, this involved analysing enormous amounts of golf data, using artificial intelligence (AI). “Without AI models, it would have taken a huge amount of manual work to go through all the archives – in this case, more than 50 years of the Open,” said Di Gregorio. “Technology has advanced massively over the past months of this huge [Covid-19] challenge and it will continue to play a key role.”

The killing of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis at the end of May, which gave new impetus to the Black Lives Matter movement, resonated hugely with UK sport during the summer. Players in many sports “took the knee”, a symbolic protest adopted from the example of American football quarterback Colin Kaepernick protesting about police brutality in 2016.

Sports broadcasters, too, have reflected Black Lives Matter in their coverage. “Sport is so visible, it’s such a big part of our culture and our livelihoods, that’s it is not a choice – it has to happen. We have to use our voice in sport to move the conversation along and to help change attitudes,” said Webster.

He pointed to Ebony Rainford-Brent and Michael Holding’s emotional and powerful film about racism in cricket, *Black Cricketers Matter*, which Sky Sports

showed during the first Test against West Indies this summer.

Webster added that Sky was committed to having “very diverse” on- and off-screen teams, but admitted “we’ve got a long way to go”.

When the Premier League resumed in mid-June, production was largely



Manchester United player Marcus Rashford returned to Premier League action last month

Getty Images

done remotely although Green said that, pre-Covid-19, BT Sport “had already begun the process of moving to as much remote production as we could. It isn’t done just on the basis of saving money, remote production is also about sustainability. We think we’re reducing our carbon footprint.”

Sky Sports’ Webster added: “When football returned, we ended up producing or broadcasting more than 100 games in six weeks – the pace of production was like we’ve never experienced before. Normally, we do 100 games in half a season.

“The viewer doesn’t know that you’re producing remotely. You still have teams on site, but a lot of the heavy lifting in terms of the production is done remotely. It’s been one of the success stories, if you can call it that, during this period.”

Football was back but crowds remained absent, draining atmosphere from matches. TV’s response was to add crowd noise to its broadcasts.

“I’ll let you into a secret: we just watched what was going on in

Germany,” said Green. Broadcasters there had introduced supporters’ roars and groans when the Bundesliga resumed, and it seemed to work.

He admitted: “I was the last one to be convinced that we should make crowd noise the default [setting], and allow our viewers to opt out.”

Webster revealed that 75% to 80% of Sky viewers watch matches with crowd noise added – and that the broadcaster had a team of eight mixing the noise effects to match the action on the pitch.

“It has been a big way of mitigating what we all know, which is that sport needs crowds to have a natural atmosphere. We’re desperate for crowds to return but, until that happens, artificial crowd noise helps massively,” said Webster.

Looking back over the six months since the March lockdown, he added: “It’s reinforced just how important sport is to so many people.”

The start of the new football season last month coincided with the beginning of what looks like a second wave of coronavirus

and the return of lockdowns, albeit locally for the moment. “Nothing immediately changes,” said Green. “We see ourselves as an extremely agile business that is able to react to circumstances as they change.”

“Let’s hope that Covid is past us in a year’s time and we are back to some sense of normality in terms of how we can operate as a broadcaster – and that the world is able to get together again and go to sporting events.”

But, he warned, the financial consequences for many sporting organisations and smaller clubs would be profound: “We need to rebuild that sporting ecosystem as soon as possible.

“However, that will be the same for so many different industries, not just sport and broadcasting.” ■

**Report by Matthew Bell. The RTS event ‘Winners, losers and own goals: Live sport in lockdown’, was held on 24 September. It was chaired by BT Sport broadcaster and journalist Reshmin Chowdhury, and produced by Vicky Fairclough and Dan Korn.**



RTS  
Yorkshire

*Waterloo Road* and *Call the Midwife* writer Lisa Holdsworth revealed how she has had “to check my privilege in the light of Black Lives Matter” during an illuminating interview for RTS Yorkshire.

The Chair of the Writers’ Guild of Great Britain said: “It’s very easy to think that we’re a lovely, right-on industry with no unconscious bias. That it’s a meritocracy and, whatever you do, as long as you’re writing good stuff, you’re going to get the job. It’s simply not true.”

Holdsworth was discussing her career and the state of UK drama with RTS Yorkshire Chair Fiona Thompson.

Her break came almost two decades ago, when Kay Mellor asked her to write an episode of ITV drama *Fat Friends*, which she described as her “sink or swim moment”.

Holdsworth was part of the *Emmerdale* writing team and went on to pen many popular dramas, including *New Tricks*. In an episode of *Midsummer Murders*, she famously knocked off Martine McCutcheon’s character with a large wheel of cheese.

During and since lockdown, Holdsworth has been scripting Sky One drama *A Discovery of Witches*. “Writing has become easier, but it was really tough to concentrate during the first



Sky

## Drama: improve access

couple of weeks due to the stress and the news. Will I get it? Will people I love get it? Will we have an industry to go back to?”

Discussing TV drama, she said she was frustrated with commissioners’ “obsession with high-jeopardy stakes – the bomb on the train, the body in the skip.

“I really miss drama that is about high emotional stakes.

That kind of drama is sorely missing from UK television at the moment. We get it in the soaps, but even the soaps are regularly dropping trains off viaducts or blowing up pubs – I’ve been guilty of it myself when I was [writing] *Emmerdale*.”

Holdsworth said it was “very difficult” to get your first break as a TV writer – “It’s still, in this country, not what you

know but who you know.”

She added: “I talk to a lot of people who call themselves aspiring writers. I say to them, ‘If you finish something, you are a writer.’ You might not be a good one, but you’re a writer because so many people never get past the third page or buying the stationery.”

You can watch the full interview at: [bit.ly/RTSYlisa](https://bit.ly/RTSYlisa).  
**Matthew Bell**

## Granada feeds news hunger

RTS  
Isle of Man

*Granada Reports* head of news Lucy West and Isle of Man reporter Joshua Stokes threw light on how the programme is covering the coronavirus crisis at an RTS Isle of Man event in early October.

The North West is a Covid-19 hot spot, but the Isle of Man

has recorded no cases since early June. “It’s a global pandemic but the Isle of Man has had its own story. We’re the first place in the British Isles that removed social distancing... It’s been a unique experience,” said Stokes, who is in his first TV job. “I’m so lucky to have a job here at the right

time... on a story this big.”

Stokes described the self-governing island as “bizarrely brilliant... for a journalist, regardless of the pandemic. The Isle of Man, in general, is a fantastic patch to work on”.

The island forms just 1% of the North West’s TV audience, but it has featured

regularly in *Granada Reports*’ pandemic coverage. “The stories we choose are the ones we think are going to resonate with our viewers, wherever they live,” said West.

“There’s a real hunger for people to understand the latest [news] coming out of government, what the changes are in terms of where they can and can’t go, and when they have to self-isolate.”

**Matthew Bell**

Gripping Netflix documentary *Last Breath* enjoyed great success at the RTS West of England Awards in early September. The feature-length film, which tells the remarkable story of a diver who survived being trapped 100 metres under the sea with only minutes of breathable air remaining, scooped four awards.

*Last Breath*, made by MetFilm Production/Floating Harbour Films, won the Documentary award, with Paul Leonard-Morgan (Composer), Sam Rogers (Editing) and Ben Baird (Sound) picking up prizes, too.

Netflix also had success with *Our Planet*, made by Bristol wildlife specialists Silverback Films, which won the Natural History and Cinematography awards.

The comedian Deborah Frances-White hosted the online ceremony. Earlier, winners had been door-stepped and presented with their RTS awards, and offered on-the-spot acceptance speeches in return.

"It's never been so important to recognise and celebrate the extraordinary talent in this region. Although we couldn't be together this year, there's no doubt we were all celebrating in our own way," said RTS West of England Chair Lynn Barlow. "My huge



Netflix

## Netflix docs on a roll

thanks to the West of England Centre Committee and Suzy Lambert, and the wonderful Deborah Frances-White.

Thanks, too, to the winners for keeping their counsel."

The Sir Ambrose Fleming Memorial Award for an outstanding contribution to television in the RTS West of England area went to Bristol's The Bottle Yard Studios, where shows including

*Poldark* and *Broadchurch* have been filmed.

Emma Napper won the Director prize for the Natural History Unit's BBC One series *Seven Worlds, One Planet*. Both this and *Our Planet* were narrated by the evergreen David Attenborough.

*Doctor Who*-related shows picked up two awards. *Doctor Who: The Macra Terror* won in the Animation category,

while *The Doctor Who Cookbook: Revisited* took Factual Entertainment and Features.

BBC One's *War on Plastic with Hugh and Anita*, made by Keo Films, secured the Factual award.

The BBC also bagged the two News awards on offer. BBC Network News won the News or Current Affairs Story award for *Amar*, its moving report about a boy disfigured during a napalm attack in Iraq. Luke David from BBC Current Affairs West was named News or Current Affairs Story Reporter of the year.

Naturalist and wildlife TV presenter Iolo Williams won the On-screen Talent prize for his work on BBC Two's *The Watches*.

Evolutions Bristol was the principal sponsor of the awards, which can be viewed at: [bit.ly/RTSwe20](https://bit.ly/RTSwe20).

**Matthew Bell**

### RTS West of England Television Awards winners

**Sir Ambrose Fleming Memorial Award** - *The Bottle Yard Studios*

**Natural History** - *Our Planet* - Silverback Films for Netflix

**Documentary** - *Last Breath* - MetFilm Production/Floating Harbour Films for Netflix

**Factual** - *War on Plastic with Hugh and Anita* - Keo Films for BBC One

**Factual Entertainment and Features** - *The Doctor Who Cookbook: Revisited* - Moon Balloon Productions

**News or Current Affairs Story** - *Amar* - BBC Network News

**News or Current Affairs Reporter** -

**Luke David**, BBC *Inside Out West* - BBC Current Affairs West

**Children's** - *I Want to Change the World* - Drummer TV for the British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust

**Short Form** - *Inside Out West: Student Nurse* - BBC West

**Flying Futures** - *Miky King* - Drummer TV

**On-screen Talent** - *Iolo Williams, The Watches* - BBC Natural History Unit for BBC Two

**Animation** - *Doctor Who: The Macra Terror* - Sun & Moon Studios/BBC Studios for BBC America

**Cinematography** - *Our Planet* - Silverback Films for Netflix

**Composer** - *Paul Leonard-Morgan, Last Breath* - MetFilm Production/

Floating Harbour Films for Netflix

**Director** - *Emma Napper, Seven Worlds, One Planet* - BBC Natural History Unit for BBC One

**Editing** - *Sam Rogers, Last Breath* - MetFilm Production/Floating Harbour Films for Netflix

**Grading** - *Blair Wallace, Earth from Space* - Evolutions Bristol/BBC Natural History Unit/Open University for BBC One

**Sound** - *Ben Baird, Last Breath* - MetFilm Production/Floating Harbour Films for Netflix

**VFX and Digital Creativity** - *BDH Creative VFX team, 8 Days: To the Moon and Back* - BBC Studios for BBC Two

# How to make a podcast

**Northern Ireland** “High production values plus audience insights” provide the key to a successful podcast. So says the producer of the BBC’s *Obsessed With...* series of audio companions for shows that include *I May Destroy You*, *Normal People* and *Line of Duty*.

“Focus on your audience and give them an elevated but inviting, stimulating, playful conversation,” said Lily Ames, Chalk & Blade’s head of production and culture.

Ames, a Canadian who has been based in London for the past six years, was talking at



an RTS Futures NI event in late August to Conor Finn, creator and host of the *Finnter-views* podcast. She described Chalk & Blade – whose clients extend from BBC Sounds

to *The Guardian* and brands such as Net-a-Porter – as a “boutique podcast production company”.

Podcasts permit “more complex storytelling”, explained Ames. “Because people are opting in, the content is hyper-focused to [a particular] demographic – it’s narrowcasting. With news, for example, podcasts are more opinionated.”

The market for podcasts is evolving rapidly: “The most

exciting new market is the under-21s. People have woken up to the fact that young people listen to podcasts. Everyone is trying to understand what under-21s want.”

Turning a podcast into a TV show – as happened with US thriller *Homecoming*, which starred Julia Roberts – “is the dream”, said Ames. “It’s something that, as a production company, we try to do. More and more TV shows and movies are looking to option [podcasts].”

In podcast production, she said, there are opportunities for a variety of producers, whose roles include logistics, booking guests and studios, writing scripts, recording and editing.

Audio engineers or sound designers, who need technical knowledge, are also in demand.

“The recording has to be perfect. People need to know how to use the equipment, and master the mixing and sound design,” she said. For audio engineers, “there’s a real demand and less supply”.

The RTS Futures NI event, “Hit TV programme to binge-worthy podcast”, was produced by Finn and Scott Duffield. It can be viewed at: [bit.ly/rtsNIpod](http://bit.ly/rtsNIpod).

**Matthew Bell**

## A lifetime in TV tech

**RTS London** Norman Green offered a personal tour through broadcast TV tech in an illuminating RTS London film released in September. ITV Network’s first head of technology discussed the big developments in TV, or what he referred to as “the fun factory”, from the early 1960s, when he was in ABC TV’s engineering research department at Teddington Studios, to ITV in the 1990s.

At ABC, Green worked on the problems of using colour film in TV and, in particular, on *The Avengers*. He went on to develop the first computer-controlled presentation switcher in Europe.

In 1972, he joined the IBA as the principal engineer in the Quality Control and Code

of Practice group. “By the end of the first day, I knew I’d made a mistake – this wasn’t television; it was the civil service. And, as I was neither civil nor a servant, I decided I must leave as soon as possible!” he recalled.

Green quickly moved to the Independent Television Companies Association as its first co-ordinating engineer, working on, among many projects, Teletext, digital video and high-definition TV. The latter led to him meeting President Mitterrand during a demo of the new technology at the Élysée Palace.

*And They Say Engineers Are Boring!* was produced for RTS London by Philip Barnes. It can be seen at: [bit.ly/RTSLgreen](http://bit.ly/RTSLgreen).

**Matthew Bell**

## RTS hosts first regional telly quiz

**London and Yorkshire** What started as a couple of centres looking into holding Zoom TV quizzes, blossomed into a collaboration that became the first RTS Regions and Nations quiz.

Produced by RTS London and Yorkshire, the early-September event drew on

the expertise of question setters from the Scotland, Northern Ireland and Midlands centres, as well as London and Yorkshire, to test the knowledge of those brave enough to be quizzed on their regional TV knowledge.

Comedy impressionist and stand-up Darren Altman hosted the competition, during which each centre presented its set of questions to an online audience.

“Think You Know About TV?” was held on 9 September. There are plans for a Christmas edition.

**Fiona Thompson**



CNN engineer Krystel Richards was named RTS Young Technologist of the Year at a special ceremony in September.

Richards was on the BBC's Broadcast Engineering Apprenticeship scheme, before joining WarnerMedia CNN Engineering as an associate broadcast-IT engineer as the bureau was preparing to relocate to its new IP production facility in Old Street, London.

"These uncertain times have brought challenges but the industry has adapted and pushed technology to its limits. It is this innovation that makes television such an exciting field to work in, with opportunities at every turn," said Richards.

"Krystel demonstrated not only an impressive breadth of understanding of the industry, but also showed great vision for both technology and education, along with a commitment to supporting others," said Terry Marsh, Chair of the RTS Young Technologist Award jury.

Abadesi Osunsade,



## Richards wins top tech prize

co-presenter of the *Techish* podcast, hosted the ceremony, which included a speech by ITN head of field operations Lucy O'Brien, a member of the awards jury.

"Getting people into the engineering side of television isn't easy, but my world is such an integral part of broadcasting's balancing act that it is important that all

broadcasters continue to encourage people to give it a go and see what it can offer in terms of career choice," said O'Brien.

Jon Block, currently chief product officer at advertising company VIOOH, won the RTS Young Technologist of the Year 12 years ago. At the ceremony, he said: "The award gave me confidence. Most importantly, it opened my eyes to the opportunities in the media world."

Arran Paul was announced as the runner-up of the RTS Young Technologist Award, receiving the Coffey Award for Excellence in Technology. Like Richards, he was on the BBC's Broadcast Engineering Apprenticeship scheme, before moving to the permanent role of location engineer.

The awards were established by the RTS with funds from the family of AM Beresford-Cooke, an engineer who contributed much to the development of British broadcasting technology.

The awards ceremony can be viewed at: [bit.ly/RTStech](https://bit.ly/RTStech).

**Matthew Bell**

## IBC Showcase highlights R&D projects

In any other year, a September without visiting the IBC techno-fest in Amsterdam would be unthinkable for TV technologists. This year, it was just yet another unthinkable departure from their routine.

Although in-person attendance at a trade-show stand or conference room was impossible, IBC organised a slew of online alternatives.

Through IBC Showcase, the organisation hosted virtual space for 1,000 exhibitors and dozens of live sessions. Some 20,000 visitors attended over the course of four days, and the Showcase programme has been extended through the

rest of the year. IBC CEO Mike Crimp said he was excited that Showcase would be 'an ongoing platform, building on the success of the opening week'.

IBC claimed that its exhibitors' live presentations and workflow tours had generated some 8,000 sales leads.

Eight ground-breaking research projects, involving more than 60 manufacturers and broadcasters, used the Showcase platform to unveil proof-of-concept demos. These multi-company collaborations were the fruit of the IBC2020 Accelerators programme, launched earlier in the year.

The R&D projects included:

a live remote production that employed 5G networks; an interactive live music talent show; a process for generating automated video content shot lists using artificial intelligence; and new techniques for streamlining and cutting costs in animation workflows.

A major panel discussion on the opening day of IBC Showcase gathered speakers from Facebook, Amazon, Netflix, Google and Tencent to discuss uptake of the next-generation video compression codec AV1.

Codecs (short for coder-decoder) are software for compressing digital data streams; working with bespoke hardware,

they enable our rising tide of video streaming services.

The tech giants are members of the Alliance for Open Media, which has funded development of the royalty-free codec. Whether AV1 can eventually displace the current dominant compression codec, H264, will depend upon ongoing patent battles over who owns the foundational technologies of all video-compression techniques – including those of AV1.

Amazon principal research engineer Yueshi Sheen said at the event that AV1 would be 'a key technology for 5G'.

**Gordon Jamieson**

**T**his month, Owen Evans celebrates three years as Chief Executive of S4C.

It's been "a very busy time", says Evans, pointing to a move to a new Carmarthen HQ, a deal with the BBC to broadcast from the corporation's new Central Square base in Cardiff and improved digital services.

These initiatives were all long in the planning, unlike the channel's response to March's coronavirus lockdown, which blew large holes in its schedules. S4C lost its live sport immediately and then its soaps, *Pobol y Cwm* and *Rownd a Rownd*, which returned to screens only last month. Two rapid commissioning rounds helped to fill the gaps.

S4C serves 500,000 Welsh speakers in Wales and a further 150,000 across the rest of the UK. "The Welsh language isn't just about our communities here, there's a digital diaspora around the world who are keen to get Welsh [shows]. It's very much a living language," says Evans.

"I was brought up in a Welsh town, I've worked across the UK and I've come back to the language, like a lot of people do in later life. It's a real privilege to be fighting for something you believe in."

Evans joined S4C from the Welsh Government, where he had responsibility for education and public services. The closest he came to a TV job was working at BT for a decade, where part of his role covered broadband strategy.

But he is adamant that a lack of television experience has been no hindrance: "Someone [in TV] said to me, 'Once you're in the media, you'll never go back.' And that's been the case. I've loved it and learnt so much."

Two years ago, the channel's digital output was criticised in an independent review, commissioned by the



Owen Evans

S4C

S4C Chief Executive **Owen Evans** talks about embracing TikTok, supporting local indies and flying the flag for Wales's indigenous tongue. Interview by **Matthew Bell**

## Mind your language

Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and led by Euryng Ogwen Williams, S4C's first director of programmes when the channel launched in 1982.

"We've transformed our

vital for the supplier of any service because you've got to shore up your future audience, and it's doubly so for the Welsh language because, if we're not getting through to that audience, then the

wouldn't want to disrespect those people who fought for the channel to be set up almost 40 years ago and are the people watching us on the linear channel."

Evans promises that the linear channel will continue to serve the older generation, but it will also showcase more challenging programmes.

Welsh, he points out, is widely spoken outside rural Wales – notably in Cardiff and Swansea, in the UK and beyond. "As well as our heartland communities, we also have this new digital diaspora – it could be in Cardiff or in Copenhagen – and we need to give them the type of content that modern urbanites, as well as

### 'I WOULD LIKE US TO BE A BIT OF AN ENFANT TERRIBLE'

digital footprint and are now on multiple platforms," says Evans. Youth-focused online service Hansh, which is distributed on platforms including TikTok, Facebook and YouTube, has seen monthly views grow from just 40,000 in 2017 to 1.5 million.

"The youth audience is

danger of the Welsh language actually dying is amplified," says Evans.

S4C's linear-TV service, however, faces a very different challenge: its audience is typically older and more rural, with programmes to match. "I would like us to be a bit of an *enfant terrible*, but I

rural people, want to watch.”

While audiences have been, at best, stagnant in Wales in recent years, S4C has grown its reach across the UK via its VoD service, S4C Clic, and other digital services.

Is Evans irritated by persisting stereotypes of the Welsh? “What do I think about the hackneyed view of Welsh people, that we turn up and sing around coal fires? Yeah, it happens – I grew up in Aberystwyth and everyone sang in the pubs there. But Wales has got so much more than coal, choirs and rugby. It’s a modern country with an outward-looking vibe to it. We have to reflect that.”

Another challenge for S4C is airing shows that reflect the wide linguistic range of its viewers.

“I want to welcome learners to the language – there’s nothing more beautiful than someone learning God’s own language,” says Evans. “We used to ghettoise learners on Sunday morning but now we have peak-hours programming where the language is simplified. The language is there for all, it shouldn’t be something that divides a nation, it should be something that brings people together.”

The lockdown hit *Iaith ar Daith* (Welsh Road Trip) featured five celebs, including Ruth Jones and Adrian Chiles, travelling across Wales to learn about the language with Welsh-speaking mentors in tow.

When the UK went into lockdown in late March, S4C acted quickly to protect its local independent producers. “Within two or three weeks of lockdown, we’d already pumped an extra £7m into commissioning. We realised that things were tough out there and nothing helped mental health better than being able to pay the mortgage.

“We tried to put as many pounds as we could back



New for the autumn on S4C:  
*Anrhegion Melys Richard Holt*  
(Richard Holt’s Sweet Treats)

Kate McCallum

into the sector so that [companies] could be producing and employing,” recalls Evans, who is hugely grateful to Wales’s indie sector for its positive response.

One of the first fruits of lockdown commissioning was a three-part drama from *Keeping Faith* producer Vox Pictures, *Cyswllt (mewn Covid)* (*Connect During Covid*), examining people’s feelings of loneliness and hope. (The third and final series of the Eve Myles drama *Keeping Faith* airs this autumn.)

Productions at many of S4C’s 50-odd suppliers – which range from one-man bands to larger indies – has resumed, but local lockdowns, which are increasing in

number, have disrupted filming. “It’s possible to shoot but we’ve got to ask ourselves: should we be shooting in certain places? We’ve also had to cancel productions at an hour’s notice when people have tested positive,” says Evans.

S4C programme budgets are typically a fifth of other UK national channels. This means that it relies on goodwill from local authorities and communities to film. “If you’re in an area that is a Covid blackspot, the last thing you want to see is a big TV crew turning up.”

But S4C also has a duty to protect Wales’s indigenous TV industry and keep productions ticking over: “Let’s

face it, other broadcasters come and go but producers in Wales rely on S4C.”

Next up for Evans is the TV licence settlement for 2022 and beyond, and negotiating S4C’s share of the pot. The Welsh-language broadcaster is now funded entirely from the licence fee, receiving just over £80m – a drop in the ocean compared with the £3.8bn the BBC receives.

“The Welsh language isn’t the most commercial language to operate in, because of the small size of the population,” says Evans.

“There are a number of things that we do that nobody else is going to provide, so we’ve got to show the value in that.” ■



**RTS Futures** An RTS Futures event at the end of September went behind the scenes at *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale* in the company of some of the younger members of their production teams. The four panellists, who are all in the early stages of their careers, discussed their jobs on two of the country's premier soaps.

Joseph Hart switches between the roles of second and third assistant director (AD) on *Emmerdale*. "ADs are logistical, organisational roles, but the third AD does have a creative outlet – it's really good fun," he explained. "A third AD is based on the floor... and does the background action. You tell the extras when and where to go."

Second ADs work backstage, getting actors ready for scenes and updating production logs.

Molly Eborall started as a runner on *Emmerdale* after being selected for an ITV assessment day. She advised: "Be confident but not overbearing. You need to show good communication skills."

Eborall is currently a third AD on *Coronation Street*.

Working as an assistant director "opens doors to a few different areas", said Rachel Jovanovic, who, until recently, was a first assistant director on *Emmerdale*. She said first ADs could go on to work as directors, production managers and schedulers.

Jovanovic has moved to



This is what the first assistant director on *Emmerdale* gets to do...

ITV

## Soaps offer way into TV

the newly created role of cohort manager during the coronavirus crisis: "I make sure everyone sticks to the restrictions ITV has in place to make filming safe. I walk around with my two-metre stick, asking people to maintain their distance.

"My job could be helping a director work out how, logistically, they can get one actor to hit another actor over the back of the head with a kettle from two metres' distance."

*Coronation Street* production secretary Georgina Anderton,

whose first TV job was as a runner on *Hollyoaks*, fulfils an administrative role, working on shooting schedules and call sheets. "I love a good spreadsheet," she joked.

The panellists, to a person, love their jobs, even though the working day is long.

"Have fun along the way – we're not saving lives, we're making telly," said Hart.

Eborall added: "The people you work with become like family because you're there 12 hours a day. There's a real buzz from being on set."

Sometimes they work on stunts, which are a thrill for both Hart and Jovanovic. "Last year, I blew up a boat," recalled Jovanovic. "I shouted action, which triggered the guy to detonate the explosion. You would not believe the adrenaline rush."

"Working in continuing drama: *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale*", was held on 28 September. The event was hosted by Alex Wootten and produced by Wootten and Jude Winstanley.

**Matthew Bell**

## Covid-19: a safe return to work

**Northern Ireland** An RTS Northern Ireland workshop offered advice from Belfast law firm Millar McCall Wylie on returning to work safely after the production lull caused by Covid-19.

Compliance with health and safety legislation is key,

said employment lawyer David Mitchell at the September event. Employers have a duty to ensure "the health, safety and welfare of all their employees... and ensure [they] are not exposed to any risks to their health or safety".

Abbie Long, a partner at

Millar McCall Wylie, said health and safety policies would probably need to be updated "to take account of all the measures that need to be put in place for coronavirus".

Employers may need to implement a separate Covid-19 policy, said Mitchell – and

put it into practice. He added: "There's no point in having a policy if it's not being adhered to."

Mitchell also looked at the consequences arising from the finish of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme at the end of this month. It is being replaced by the Job Support Scheme, which will run until the end of April next year.

**Matthew Bell**

**The Generation Game:** Can the BBC win over today's young audience? Edited by Michael Wilson and Neil Fowler, published by Bite-Sized Books, priced £7.99. ISBN: 979-8665954899



Book review

This engaging book is, to say the least, timely. If Tim Davie can squeeze a copy into his backpack, he will find much to stimulate and inform him. A wide range of writers offer their views on what could be a defining issue of his tenure as Director-General.

Many of those who have written essays for *The Generation Game* will be familiar to *Television* readers. The RTS's own Graeme Thompson and Tim Hartley, and regular contributor Marcus Ryder, are represented here among 21 well-chosen writers embracing media journalists, broadcasters, programme-makers, politicians and academics.

Their remarks are juxtaposed with some choice sound bites, notably from Nicky Morgan, briefly Boris Johnson's Secretary of State at the DCMS, and presenters



## Talkin' 'bout my generation

such as *Blue Peter's* Sarah Greene and Peter Purves.

Arguably, most of interest are the views of young people themselves, expressed in eight vox pops. Their comments are short – but they are the audience that the BBC needs to have on its side for it to continue to thrive.

Their ages range from

young teenagers to a teacher in her late twenties. Some say the BBC is old-fashioned. Some call the licence fee good value. Others say it is too expensive. I suspect that when 19-year-old student Phoebe Powers from Wigan says “the BBC feels formal and serious”, she is echoing many of her generation.

Throughout, there is little consensus on what the BBC needs to do to get the young on side. What is clear, however, is that, for decades, broadcasters have thought long and hard about how to persuade young people to use their services.

In pre-pandemic days, many of them were out having a good time, too busy to stay in and watch TV.

Yet, even then, provided commissioners came up with the right shows, teens and twentysomethings would make the time to watch them. As Greg Dyke might have said: “It’s the content, stupid.”

In an era of peak TV, the under-35s have unprecedented choice – but certain shows, effectively marketed, still break through.

Perhaps the corporation should ignore calls to reboot BBC Three as a linear channel and focus instead on seeking out and commissioning must-watch content that catches the imagination of millennials and their younger siblings. They’ve already made a promising start, as shows such as *Fleabag*, *Normal People* and *I May Destroy You* have shown. **Steve Clarke**

## The UPSIDE

### All hail our beloved puppet masters

Welcome back *Spitting Image*, absent from our screens for far too long. Let’s hope that the new incarnation of the puppet pranksters, a coup for BritBox, can match the heights of the shows that lampooned figures of the Thatcher-Reagan era.

Early signs are encouraging as

the creators re-edited the first episode late into the night to include Donald Trump’s positive test for coronavirus.

If a weekly fix of *Spitting Image* isn’t enough to keep audiences amused, then Brit-Box has assembled 14 *Best of Spitting Image* compilations to binge on – an impossible dream in the pre-digital 1980s, when the show first aired.

### Plastic sets make it feel more real

Staying with satire, the Upside congratulates *Have I Got News*

*For You* on reaching its 30th anniversary on 28 September. Four days later, it was good to see Hislop, Merton and co back in the studio – though separated from one another by Perspex screens, with an extremely socially distanced audience.

The show was vastly more atmospheric than earlier this year, when it was forced to broadcast from panellists’ homes.

### Consumer advice and vital statistics

It is good to have financial guru Martin Lewis back on ITV. Last

month, he returned to the studio for the first time since March to present *The Martin Lewis Money Show Live*.

His tips on how to get the best deals on savings, mortgages and insurance products have never been so valuable as they are now and provide a real public service for viewers.

Another number cruncher playing an invaluable role during the pandemic is the ubiquitous Tim Harford. His *More or Less* programme on Radio 4 is required listening for those of us struggling to make sense of our daily dose of coronavirus-related statistics.



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