

September 2022

Television



**TV's fantasy
flagships**

THE FIGHT FOR ATTENTION

RTS LONDON CONVENTION 2022
TUESDAY 27 SEPTEMBER
KINGS PLACE, 90 YORK WAY, LONDON N1 9AG

CHAired BY:

Priya Dogra

President & Managing Director, EMEA
(ex. Poland), Warner Bros. Discovery

SPEAKERS:

Barbara Arvanitidis Senior Producer, CNN

Tim Davie Director-General, BBC

Nima Elbagir Chief International Investigative Correspondent, CNN

Michael Grade Chair, Ofcom

Maria Kyriacou President ViacomCBS Networks UK, Australia and Israel

Alex Mahon CEO, Channel 4

Dame Carolyn McCall DBE CEO, ITV

Ben McOwen Wilson Managing Director, Google Play, EMEA

Gianluca Mezzofiore Investigative Producer, CNN

Katie Polglase Investigative Producer, CNN

Amol Rajan Journalist & Presenter

Stephen van Rooyen EVP & CEO, UK & Europe, Sky

Gerhard Zeiler President, International, Warner Bros. Discovery

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From the CEO



Our cover story is devoted to one of television's hottest genres – fantasy, for decades a stalwart of popular and literary culture. As Tara Conlan

reports, no effort has been spared to ensure that HBO's prequel to *Game of Thrones*, *House of the Dragon*, and Amazon's *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* made it to the screen in style.

These uber-expensive, epic shows, with their star casts and use of British craft skills promise a visual feast for their millions of fans.

At the other end of the TV drama landscape is the naturalism of Stefan Golaszewski's new show, *Marriage*. It

was the subject of an RTS event featuring its stars, Sean Bean and Nicola Walker, in which Golaszewski discussed his search for authenticity.

Another of our August events was devoted to the brilliant Peter Kosminsky's *The Undeclared War*, a warning about the perils of cyberwarfare set in the very near future.

An RTS London event looked at how *Barb* is evolving so that it can now measure audiences for streaming services. Matthew Bell's report contains some surprising findings. Also, don't miss his analysis of why TV series are cancelled.

This summer is certain to be remembered for its heatwaves and mounting concern over the cost of

living. Thankfully, we had the Lionesses to take us out of ourselves and bring football home for the first time since 1966. Caitlin Danaher's passionate piece celebrating their success and what it might mean for TV coverage of other women's sport will lift your spirits.

I can't guarantee good weather for the RTS London Convention on 27 September, but I can promise a stellar line-up of industry leaders. Don't miss Steve Clarke's interview with conference Chair Priya Dogra.

Theresa Wise

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TV diary

It's a burning hot Friday in August, and on a small islet in the Evros river that divides Greece from Turkey, a nine-year-old girl called Aya is dying of a scorpion sting. Her five-year-old sister, Maria, has already died.

Why is no doctor treating them? Because they are Syrian refugees, kicked like a football back and forth between the two countries. "No one hears us. No one wants us," weeps 27-year-old Baida al Saleh, in a WhatsApp voice message she sends to *Channel 4 News*.

Her mobile battery is failing but she manages to send us video of the refugees, and we broadcast a story. The Greek government responds by denying that the 39 people are on Greek territory, even though the European Court of Human Rights has ordered it to mount a rescue.

We start to be trolled on Twitter by people saying we made up the story and it's fake news.

■ **Over the weekend, we contact humanitarian agencies and Greek government departments to ask for comment, hoping they will do something. Where is the line between being a journalist and a humanitarian?**

After nearly 40 years as a foreign correspondent, I still struggle with that question. The public service remit we have at *Channel 4 News* means that my job is simply to tell the story – it's up to others to act on it. But a little girl is dying – surely, we can do more?

■ This time last year, as the Taliban swept into Kabul, I felt the dilemma



Channel 4

Lindsey Hilsum explains why a foreign correspondent's role can resemble that of a faithless lover

more acutely than ever. Women I had filmed on previous reporting trips were sending messages begging me to help them leave the country.

Mostly, I could do nothing, but I did help some human rights workers get asylum for a former policewoman, whose story of terrible abuse I had told on *Channel 4 News*. She and her two little boys are safely in Canada now.

■ **On the whole, we don't get so involved. We also tell alternative sides of the story: in Afghanistan, in June, we filmed Dr Roshanak Wardak, a gynaecologist/obstetrician, who has been appointed by the Taliban as head of mother/child health-care in her province.**

She's not exactly a Taliban supporter, but she hated what she saw as

US occupation, and believes that the end of the war is an opportunity.

She speaks with derision of the women who have fled, believing that they, like her, should stay and help other Afghans. Personally, I don't blame any Afghan woman who wants to leave, but I have to admire her determination and courage.

■ Sometimes, I feel that being a journalist is like being a faithless lover. All the time I was in Ukraine this year I felt guilty about not being in Afghanistan. Now I feel bad about not being in Ukraine, as I haven't reported from there since May.

At *Channel 4 News*, we have fewer resources than other broadcasters, but international news has always been a priority and eye-witness reporting is the bedrock of our programme. Sometimes, viewers stop me in the street to say how much they appreciate it.

■ **Our story about the Syrian refugees became headline news in Greece, which put more pressure on its Government. That weekend, some Afghan refugees pushed a dinghy back to the islet, and the Syrians were able to reach mainland Greece, where they were rescued by the police.**

On the Monday, the Greek minister for migration visited the group. They were receiving food, water and medical attention, he said, and Maria's body would be brought to the mainland for burial.

It's rare that a story has a direct impact. But, on this occasion, I think it did.

Lindsey Hilsum is international editor of *Channel 4 News*.

COMFORT CLASSIC

Matthew Bell hums along to a gloriously funny reconstruction of the bad attitudes and fashions of 1970s crime-fighting

Galloping inflation, strikes, oversized flares, platform boots, and suffocating heat. It's almost as if we're reliving the 1970s. And the perfect TV companion? Look no further than the hugely enjoyable and critically adored sci-fi cop series *Life on Mars*.

Sam Tyler (John Simm), a by-the-book, impeccably liberal detective in noughties Manchester, is knocked unconscious by a speeding car while listening to David Bowie's *Life on Mars?*... and wakes up, dressed in big collar, Chelsea boots and leather jacket, in 1973.

He's still a cop, though a fish out of water in the unreconstructed police force of the 1970s. In shock, Tyler is told by young detective Chris Skelton (Marshall Lancaster) that "you're as white as a ginger bird's arse". Immediately, the viewer knows where they are – *The Sweeney* with added irony.

Skelton, though, is only the hors d'oeuvre for the show's main course, Philip Glenister's snarling DCI Gene Hunt, a man accurately described by Tyler as "an overweight, over-the-hill, nicotine-stained, borderline-alcoholic homophobe with a superiority complex and an unhealthy obsession with male bonding". To which, Hunt's rejoinder is: "You make that sound like a bad thing."

The police creed, according to Hunt, reads: "Grab 'em by the balls and their hearts and minds will surely follow."

The writers, principally Matthew Graham and Ashley Pharoah, who co-created *Life on Mars* with TV legend Tony Jordan, have a huge amount of fun with the dialogue. Here's Hunt, oblivious to the coming of Margaret Thatcher, wading into politics: "There will never be a woman prime minister as long as I have a hole in my arse."



Life on Mars

John Simm (left) as Sam Tyler and Philip Glenister as Gene Hunt

BBC

Ear candy

Production designers Brian Sykes and Matt Gant lovingly recreated the 1970s and the soundtrack from the era is a treat. But *Life on Mars* is more than a period romp. Tyler's existential crisis is both palpable and moving – is he alive or dead, dreaming or has he travelled back in time to the 1970s? And there's a beautiful, slow-burn romance between Tyler and WPC Annie Cartwright, played by the wonderful Liz White.

Simm decided to leave after two series and was given a superb finale by the writers. A year or two later, Sky One's *The 50 Greatest TV Endings*, put it at number one.

The BBC, however, wanted more and producer Kudos was happy to oblige.

Unlike most TV spin-offs, *Ashes to Ashes* was almost as good as the original. The principal cops – minus Simm and White – returned, and were joined by Keeley Hawes as DI Alex Drake, a modern-day Met detective who is shot and wakes up in 1981. Hunt has swapped his Ford Cortina for an Audi Quattro, and London has replaced Manchester as the show's setting. Otherwise, it's steady as she goes.

By now, the show had seeped into the nation's consciousness. So much so that both Labour and the Conservatives used it in their campaigns for the 2010 general election.

A Labour poster plonked Tory leader David Cameron on the bonnet of a Quattro next to the slogan, "Don't let him take Britain back to the 1980s", an attempt to remind voters of a decade blighted by unemployment and social unrest. The Tories responded by adopting Hunt's catchphrase: "Fire up the Quattro. It's time for change."

After three series and another clever ending, *Ashes to Ashes* brought down the curtain on time-travelling cops. Or did it? Intriguingly, both Simm and Glenister have recently hinted that the show could return, and Graham and Pharoah have even written a pilot episode for a third outing, the appropriately titled *Lazarus*.

It's hardly unknown for a TV show to be raised from the dead, is it? ■

Life on Mars and Ashes to Ashes are both on BBC iPlayer.



With a Tory party leadership contest just the latest chapter in the UK's

seemingly endless political turmoil, Alastair Campbell and Rory Stewart's podcast, *The Rest is Politics*, may help to see you through.

Given their respective backgrounds – maverick political high-flyers, each with their own distinctive hinterlands – theirs is a penetrating gaze.

Campbell, a prolific journalist and writer best known as Tony Blair's acerbic spin doctor, knows No 10 from the inside. Stewart, Secretary of State for International Development in Theresa May's Cabinet and an early public critic of Boris Johnson, is also a best-selling author, academic and royal tutor.

Both are keen to expose the inner workings of the corridors of power – no matter how damning the anecdotes are for their former colleagues.

In their recent post-mortem on the

BBC TV leadership debate, Stewart shared some of his treasure trove of Liz Truss stories. He recalled both the "rocket" he received for breaching her strict message discipline and how she once told him that foreign secretary was "the last job I would want".

First-hand accounts like these are the main draw of this podcast. But the duo's analysis of the policy debates is rigorous, and the scope is impressively global. As well as Truss and Rishi Sunak's contrasting approaches to the economy, the same episode covered Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi's resignation and the worsening famine in parts of Africa.

They make an amusingly odd couple, as much for their temperaments as their politics: Stewart has an unwavering earnestness while Campbell is grumpier, and they both enjoy winding each other up over their differences.

That the podcast is consistently topping the charts is a cause for optimism: it indicates a growing appetite for healthier discussion of serious subjects. ■

Harry Bennett

WORKING LIVES

Script editor

BBC

Doctor Who

Fiona McAllister works for Nicola Shindler's new indie, Quay Street Productions, having learnt the ropes on the soaps *Emmerdale* and *Coronation Street* and then on Jodie Whittaker's *Doctor Who*.

What does the job involve?

Basically, the job is finding brilliant writers and working with them on their ideas; then, once we find the right broadcaster, working with the commissioner and the writer to create the series.

All production companies work differently and some have either development or production script editors, but, at Quay Street, I work across both, so I get to stay with the writer from the very beginning of the idea all the way through production and post.

What is your role during the development stage?

Development involves reading books and articles, keeping up with what's on TV, reading a lot of scripts and meeting with writers to talk about their ideas

and seeing if we would be a good fit. That relationship with the writer is crucial because talking about stories can be a bit exposing – honesty, trust and humour are important. As a script team, we're pretty collaborative, so each project might get a couple of editors.

And during production?

By the time we reach prep, the scripts should be in pretty good shape. The director and producer may have editorial notes to feed in at this point, and this is where we're tweaking and amending the scripts to fit production specifics, such as locations, schedule and budget. This is also where we do a read-through, which usually involves a dialogue pass.

As an exec, I'm currently working with a brilliant script editor who leads on the more time-consuming jobs (writing notes, issuing amends, proofing drafts, etc) but I'm across all the story changes and script continuity. It's a pretty sweet deal.

How many rewrites does a script go through?

That depends on the writer and the project. Some writers may not need that many drafts, or even that much input from a script editor, and in those cases my role might be more research-oriented – for example, if it's based on a true story, I may have to find the real people involved and connect them with the writer.

On other shows, the story emerges through the redrafting process, where writers want script editors to contribute editorially.

How did you become a script editor?

After studying English literature at Hull university, I got an entry-level job in ITV scheduling, then became the script assistant on *Emmerdale*. I was typing up amendments, checking continuity and writing up synopses.

I'm very protective of soap, it's incredibly hard work and it's a steep learning curve – I worked with some fantastically talented people. I did

research for a few years, then assistant script editing, script editing and senior script editing. I moved on to *Coronation Street* and *Doctor Who* for Jodie Whittaker's first two series, before going to Kudos to work in development and then to Quay Street.

What are you working on at the moment?

I'm working across a pretty cool slate of shows, but I'm chuffed that *Significant Other* has been announced – it's a unique, weird comedic drama that we've been working on for a while with brilliant writers Dana Fainaru and Hamish Wright. Plus, it's got a dream cast, director and producer. It's properly exciting. And we've just wrapped on Russell T Davies's *Nolly*, starring Helena Bonham Carter. My colleague Charlie worked on *Nolly* but I read the scripts and peeked at the rushes and they are stunning. Both will be coming to ITV next year.

What makes for a good script editor?

If you don't like reading, it's not the job for you – it's a sedentary job that involves a lot of reading and note writing. And you've got to love TV. It also requires hard work, attention to detail, enthusiasm and good organisation (or a heavy reliance on calendar apps).

Can it be tricky working with writers?

Writers usually want the input of a script editor. At Quay Street we're led by the writer's ideas. You have to ask questions and sometimes challenge them, sometimes contribute with ideas and editorial suggestions, but not tell them what to do.

My job is not to be prescriptive and force a writer down a certain path; I'm not the writer. It's my job to help them achieve their vision, and get them green-lit. And, sometimes, offer emotional support. It's more of a friendship, I think.

What are the biggest challenges?

Picking yourself up when a script is rejected. When you're working with a writer on a project you really believe in, not getting it commissioned can be devastating. You work closely with a writer and form a bond with them – you really want them to succeed. It isn't necessarily a reflection on the

quality of the work; it might not be the right time now, but it could happen in the future. Sometimes a project takes years for the stars to align and the right commissioner to get on board.



What do you bring to work with you?

When I started everything was on paper, so I had a massive bag filled with scripts, notebooks and pens; now I carry an iPad, which is much better for the trees and my back. When a show is being filmed, though, I still have physical scripts with the annotations and amends handwritten in; it's probably more superstition than practicality.

What does a typical working day look like for you?

Every day is different; there's always a pile of scripts screaming to be read, but I could be in a writers room, working on script notes or story documents – there's a lot of note writing – talking to a writer or in a development meeting. When you're in production, it gets more varied.

What are the best and worst parts of the job?

They are two sides of the same coin – when something you've worked on goes out on TV it is simultaneously the

best and worst feeling. It's the best because it's been such a long process and you're super proud of it, but I'm also a masochist, so I'm on Twitter reading what people are saying about it.

Working on a TV institution such as *Doctor Who* must be terrifying – was it?

There was a lot of pressure because people feel such a sense of ownership over it – including me! I've watched it religiously since the reboot. I probably should have stopped looking at Twitter then, but I didn't.

What advice would you give to someone wanting to be a script editor?

You don't need to pay for expensive courses at film or television school – you can learn on the job. I learnt by working with brilliant script editors and seeing how they did it.

There are also lots of film scripts available online – read them and work out why they work. Get in touch with production companies and offer to write script reports for them – that's often the first step to script editing.

I came at it a different way and found it invaluable working my way up on continuing dramas; I would highly recommend it. You could also start as a runner, to get your foot in the door and then try to move into script editing that way.

Where do you see your career going?

Script editing can be a great stepping-stone to either writing or producing, but it can also be a job for life. I love it, but I'm hoping I could make the move into producing in the future.

What type of TV series would you love to work on?

At Quay Street, I get to work across many different types of programmes – as a script editor, it helps to have a broad taste in TV. But I was a bit obsessed with the Second World War drama *Band of Brothers* – it's a perfect TV show. If I had a time machine, I'd go back and work on that. ■

Fiona McAllister was interviewed by Matthew Bell.



The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power

The power of fantasy

Two of the biggest shows of the year, *House of the Dragon* and *The Rings of Power*, provide much more than mere escapism, says **Tara Conlan**

Magic and myths have ruled popular culture for years. Such is their enduring power that HBO and Sky Atlantic's *Game of Thrones* spin-off, *House of the Dragon*, and Amazon's *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* are big weapons in the wars between the global streaming giants.

But why does high-fantasy drama continue to resonate and pull in huge audiences? Boyd Hilton, *Heat* magazine entertainment director, thinks there is a "huge appetite" for these shows, partly because fans can lose themselves in a "whole universe meticulously built" by the authors who wrote the books they are based on.

"If you go back to Tolkien and other authors, such as CS Lewis, there has always been a history of this type of fantasy story."

House of the Dragon is a prequel to *Game of Thrones (GoT)*, set 200 years prior to the original and based on

George RR Martin's book *Fire and Blood*. Its co-showrunner, director and executive producer, Miguel Sapochnik, agrees that escapism is part of the appeal but tells *Television* that *House of the Dragon* "is more rooted in reality than the previous show".

Whereas *GoT* had humanoid White Walkers and giants, "we have dragons and that's about it. If we could treat dragons like a combination of horses and weapons of mass destruction, then I feel we could get into the real drama of the story."

Novelist and *GoT* fan Amanda Craig says she is amazed that fantasy is "still something of a dirty secret among literary folk like me who love it. I see it as part of a great literary tradition that includes Homer and also Shakespeare's more magical plays."

Craig thinks it can also satirise or highlight contemporary social and political issues in a way other genres find harder – and it enables audiences to "feel you're seeing the truth, but not

directly... through a glass darkly, as it were. I think it touches tremendously deep aspects of the human heart and imagination and also has this powerful ability to kind of address a lot of contemporary concerns, but at an oblique angle."

Actor Lloyd Owen, who plays Elendil in *The Rings of Power*, thinks part of the appeal is down to Tolkien. He had a "profound influence" on the modern-day genre, as he "essentially curated, condensed and revived ancient Celtic and European mythological tales and poured their eternal truths into a story that all could access".

That was helped on *The Rings of Power* by the "mind-blowing scale and astonishing attention to detail" during filming. He says that "seeing the set of the capital city of Númenor for the very first time was very, very special".

House of the Dragon and *The Rings of Power* (also a prequel) launch within a couple of weeks of each other. However, Hilton thinks there is room for

both, adding that Netflix also has high-profile fantasy series, including *The Sandman* and *The Witcher*. He says: “The investment pays off even though the figures are eye-watering. Reportedly, Amazon paid the Tolkien estate around £200m just for the rights to make TV series related to *Lord of the Rings*.”

Hilton believes it was a “no brainer” for HBO to make *House of the Dragon*, despite its “epic” cost, because *Game of Thrones* was a worldwide hit when first shown, and many new fans watch reruns on Sky Atlantic.

Sapochnik, who won an Emmy for his work on *GoT*, says he did not feel under pressure to create another hit, despite the huge expectations: “It’s like some people don’t feel pain... I don’t have the pressure of those kind of things. I don’t care. That’s why you’re hired.”

The numbers show what an immense feat it was: 10 months of filming, with a 2,000-strong crew working across three countries, 5,000 costumes and four directors. All during a pandemic.

Covid was the show’s biggest challenge, admits Sapochnik. “The logistics were a nightmare, [they] were exhausting [but] one of the... most complex and hardest-to-fathom things was what it did to us.” At the beginning of the pandemic, the production had a weekly meeting for crew who knew or were related to people who had died of Covid to help with any mental health issues.

“So, you’re dealing with helping people to cope with the grief but also keeping working. Then, over time... that compassion started to ebb away and there was this slight meanness that started to exist, which was, ‘I have to look after my own... I don’t have time for this any more’. And that was even harder. So I lament that.”

Despite all the precautions, “we finally got hit by Omicron in December; we lost 80 people in one week and it shut us down.” This highlighted another issue. Unlike *GoT*, which was shot in Northern Ireland, *House of the Dragon*’s main lot was in Leavesden, Hertfordshire. And the post-pandemic production boom had led to a shortage of trained workers.

As Sapochnik explains, “There are not enough people with the skill sets to facilitate the number of shows being

made because we have a boom in the television industry... around 450 shows are being made, or something insane – we don’t have enough crews to make that many shows.”

He declines to reveal the costs but says: “We had a Covid budget. Without it, we’d have fallen at the first hurdle, pretty much.”

Since his time on *GoT* – which was “huge and I did a 129-day shoot for just two episodes – everything’s got more expensive.... The costs of the sets were

Dragon, by contrast, is about one family, mostly in one area, which “allows us to spend more time with the characters and get deeper into them. The whole first season is about the dissolution of the Targaryen family.”

Sapochnik hopes that “if you haven’t seen *Game of Thrones*, then you don’t need to... this is a story about the decline of an empire and everyone likes a good *Titanic* story.”

Game of Thrones was notorious for its often extreme violence, and its prequel



coming in and they were just ridiculous, they were astronomical. I thought: this just can’t be. I know we’re not in Northern Ireland any more, which is cheaper, but it was incredibly expensive.

“Then it turned out that the timber used to construct sets cost more because, during the pandemic, no one was chopping timber.”

Fortunately, part of the plan for *House of the Dragon* has been to “pull back” from the massive scale of its predecessor, says Sapochnik – “starting smaller because otherwise you’ve got nowhere to go”.

Partly, this has been due to “the big difference” between the two shows in that the original “spanned multiple families over multiple continents”.

is unafraid to make its audience wince, but Sapochnik says it is used to make a point. Two graphic storylines are intertwined – a butchered caesarean forced on the queen and men killing each other in a tournament – to show that “the birthing bed is a woman’s battleground. We needed the birth to be as treacherous, dangerous and violent as the battle taking place in the tournament.

“In one of them, two guys are bashing each other’s brains in for no reason whatsoever. In the other, this woman is fighting for her life and essentially being murdered by her husband.

“I watched it recently at a screening and found it really disturbing. I know that’s a good thing because the point hasn’t been lost.” ■



Jonathan Brady/PA Wire

Chloe Kelly (right) after scoring the winning goal of the Euro 2022 final

Game changer for TV sport

May 2016. Tears cascade at the King Power Stadium as Andrea Bocelli serenades a sea of ecstatic, incredulous Leicester City fans. We've achieved the impossible, our team of giant-slaying underdogs have toppled the phenomenally rich "top six" Goliaths of modern-day football, defying odds of 5,000/1 to lift the Premier League trophy. It's surely the most historic football moment I will ever experience. At 18, my life as a football fan has peaked.

July 2022. I'm part of the largest crowd ever seen at a European Championship final, men's or women's, as

Caitlin Danaher lauds the Lionesses' success and assesses how television coverage of other women's sports might benefit

the Lionesses face old foes Germany at Wembley. Despite the historic rivalry, the atmosphere is one of pure celebration. No boos echo as the opposing team sings their national anthem. Instead, a record-breaking 87,192 fans prepare to savour a game that, regardless of the result, will go down in

history as a watershed moment for women's football.

An audacious dink from Ella Toone. A scrappy goal sensationally celebrated by Chloe Kelly. The Lionesses defeat eight-time winners Germany 2-1 to clinch England's first major international trophy for 56 years. Having been banned by the FA for half a century, denied the opportunity to play in school, faced with years of underfunding, misogyny, abuse and indifference, it's England's women who finally bring football home. At 24, my life as a football fan is only just beginning.

The Euros final reached an audience peak of 17.4 million on BBC One, with a further 5.9 million watching online – by some distance, the most watched

women's football game on UK television, ever. "In 2009, the women's Euros total TV reach was 2.5 million. Fast forward and we're now seeing the reach for the 2022 Euros at 27.4 million," says the BBC's head of TV sport, Philip Bernie. "This summer really was a game-changer. Women's football will never be the same again."

For the uninitiated, the explosion of the sport and its stars this summer may seem to have come from nowhere, but it has been building for years.

In 2017, 4 million viewers tuned in to Channel 4 to watch the Netherlands knock out England in the Uefa women's Euro semi-final. "It looks a little bit small fry now, but it was a big moment in terms of women's football, and that was a big risk that the channel took at the time," says Channel 4's commissioning editor for sport, Joe Blake-Turner.

Since then, the women's game has been the fastest-growing sport on TV. Last year, the women's domestic game received a huge boost when the FA Women's Super League signed a landmark broadcast deal with Sky and the BBC. The mixture of paid and free-to-air television offered the league both a significant investment and a huge rise in exposure, as broadcast audiences increased by 258%.

Meanwhile, DAZN secured the hugely coveted global rights for the Uefa Women's Champions League (WCL). As part of the four-season deal, the streamer has partnered with YouTube to make the first two years available free. It's the first time Uefa has centralised all Women's Champions League matches globally; viewership figures for season one are impressive, with fans tuning in from 230 territories.

Of course, the timing of DAZN's deal with Uefa is no happy accident. With this year's Euros and next year's World Cup, DAZN hopes to capitalise on the peak in interest in women's football to add new subscribers. "We knew that this momentum and this emphasis was coming, and we structured our deal accordingly," says Katie Smith, VP of rights partner relations at DAZN. "It's just exploded, which is brilliant for us. We're looking forward to seeing how that translates into viewership, both on YouTube and on DAZN."

Fans looking to follow up on their favourite Euros players will find many of them in the WCL, including finalists Lucy Bronze (Barcelona Femeni) and Young Player of the Tournament Lena Oberdorf (Vfl Wolfsburg). Yet, as 80% >

England captain
Leah Williamson



BT Sport

'If you can see it, you can be it'

'You have all set an example that will be an inspiration for girls and women today, and for future generations.' So read the Queen's congratulatory message to the Lionesses.

One phrase, repeated countless times by presenters and pundits alike over the course of the Euros, summarised the transcendent hopes for the tournament's legacy: 'If you can see it, you can be it.'

A whole new audience has been brought to women's football thanks to the BBC's unprecedented TV coverage. Inspired by the Lionesses' heroics, the next generation of women footballers will be entering a new world.

This will be a world where women's football can pack the biggest stadium in the UK, where it's normal to air a women's match on prime-time TV – and where an English team can actually win.

Now, thousands of young girls can dare to dream of lifting a major football trophy for their country. One such

hopeful is 13-year-old Eloise Mitchell, who lives and breathes football.

Eloise plays for Crystal Palace under-14s. Like her favourite player, Fran Kirby, she's a central midfielder with an appetite for smashing in goals from 25 yards out. Last season, her goal tally ran to double figures.

When I ask her what she can imagine being when she grows up other than a professional footballer, she looks puzzled, wracking her brain, before replying, 'Nothing'.

Having been to three women's FA cup finals and several WSL games, the Euros have been another inspirational experience for Eloise, who hopes that, one day, she can play for England and even win a world cup.

Shouting over the thunderous crowd, England captain Leah Williamson's post-match interview to BBC Sport contained a rousing proclamation for the millions watching at home: 'I tell you what, the kids are alright'. With role models like these, they certainly will be.

of WCL audiences are male, DAZN's next challenge is to find a way to bring in more female viewers.

The key to this will be constructing a mythology: after all, what is football without theatre? "We have to start telling more stories about the players, building more narratives," says Smith, "so that fans aren't just watching the highlights and seeing the incredible goals, they're being given a compelling reason to watch, and they have a 'why' to get into the women's game."

Take DAZN's spotlight on Ballon d'Or winner Alexia Putellas of Barcelona Femení. A 10-year-old girl witnesses football's greats, Ronaldinho, Eto'o, Zidane and Ronaldo, battle it out in the El Clásico 2004. Years later, she is playing in front of a sold-out crowd of 91,553 at Camp Nou in her own El Clásico.

The history-making Champions League quarter-final against arch-rivals Real Madrid would mark the highest attendance ever seen at a women's football game, only for Barcelona to break that record once more in their semi-final against Wolfsburg. The possibilities for the women's game to produce its own icons are endless, if only they are given the time and investment by national broadcasters.

So, what happens next? While the excitement around women's football has been spectacular, sports rights specialist Sarah Parfitt warns that change won't happen overnight: "It's going to take a few cycles of rights deals before the domestic clubs become financially sustainable. That's a bit of a wake-up call to realise how far it is we've still got to go.

"The more the commercial investment from brands, the better the rights deals and the more tickets that are sold, the more financially sustainable the domestic clubs will be," she adds. "Effectively, that is the same equation across all women's sports."

The success in women's football has been a rallying cry to governing bodies, the media and brands to show what is possible, with exponential growth in other sports very likely to follow.

Women's rugby has already seen enormous growth this year with the huge success of the Six Nations. Rather than running the women's competition alongside the men's as a secondary brand, the BBC gave it a separate window in April. The final round of games aired on BBC Two

gave the sport crucial space and visibility in the broadcast schedule.

The Women's Sports Trust reports that viewing figures increased by 627% on last year, making it the most-watched Women's Six Nations on record. Such stats will be music to the ears of ITV, which secured the rights for the Women's Rugby World Cup, which is being held in New Zealand this October.



Women's Six Nations
2022 England vs Ireland

England Rugby

Elsewhere, women's cricket has also experienced a huge influx of investment. The prize money for the ICC Women's Cricket World Cup 2022 was raised to \$3.5m, up 75% on 2017.

Sky recently announced that it would extend its broadcast deal with the ECB for another four years. This will give England Women a defined scheduling commitment for the first time, with two T20 internationals screening free-to-air.

The Hundred, which was shown across the BBC and Sky this summer, has also been a boon to cricket. Designed with gender parity at its heart, the competition sees teams with both men and women's squads playing in the same grounds, often in back-to-back matches.

The competition launched in 2021 with a standalone women's game broadcast live on the BBC, during which thousands of tickets to other women's games were sold. "What the Hundred has done for the women's game is almost immeasurable. The visibility that it provided the women's game last year was incredible," says Parfitt.

Expect to see some serious bids for

the rights to next year's Fifa Women's World Cup, which Parfitt describes as "one of the UK's crown jewels". She adds: "I think that the BBC is going to have real competition on its hands from ITV, which saw the enormous audience the BBC had [for the final]. It's going to be interesting to see how that plays out," she says.

The corporation stole a march in 2017, so might Channel 4 throw its hat in the ring? Its commissioning editor for sport is giving nothing away, but the goal is to remain very much in the space of women's sport.

"The cat's out the bag now, everyone's on it," says Channel 4's Blake-Turner. "So, we'll have to develop a different tactic. But it's clearly the place to be." ■

RTS London Convention Chair **Priya Dogra**'s track record in billion-dollar deals gives her a unique perspective on today's media landscape, says Steve Clarke



Priya Dogra

Warner Bros Discovery

A very modern media mogul

For an Indian-born entertainment executive who has spent much of her life working for Time Warner in New York, Priya Dogra needs no reminding that today's television businesses operating at scale have no option but to think globally. "Nowadays, hit shows come from all over the world," she says.

Dogra, 43, was the big winner of the recent Warner Bros Discovery international reshuffle and, as the London-based President and Managing Director for EMEA, she leads one of the key international divisions of the newly merged behemoth.

The company's brands in Europe include Warner Bros Pictures, Warner

Bros Television, HBO and HBO Max, Discovery Channel, Discovery+, CNN, Eurosport, Cartoon Network, Adult Swim, Food Network, Quest, Really, Animal Planet, TLC, ID, HGTV, and Turner Classic Movies.

In other words, Dogra oversees a portfolio embracing streaming, movies, sports, TV networks and home entertainment, as well as programming and local production.

Despite her remarkable career, she is largely unknown to many in the British television community; the bulk of her working life has been spent across the Atlantic, in Canada and, more recently, the US. There she ran Time Warner's global mergers and acquisitions team from New York during a pivotal time in the company's

evolution. She was a key figure in the company's \$109bn merger with AT&T. Earlier, in 2014, she successfully defended Time Warner against 20th Century Fox's hostile bid.

This relative anonymity in the UK is about to change with her chairing of the RTS London Convention, "The fight for attention". In fact, she returned to work in London in November 2020 as President, WarnerMedia EMEA and Asia (excluding China) just as the UK was bracing itself for another prolonged Covid-19-induced lockdown.

"In retrospect, it wasn't the best timing," she recalls. "We were in lockdown for something like six months. Here I was, in a city I hadn't lived in for over a decade, managing a new job and trying to do it all from the ▶"

› comfort of my home office. That was not how I envisaged either my move or taking on a new role. The first six months were very challenging.”

It is Monday morning, and she is speaking to me over Zoom from her home where she is working today. Although she doesn't explicitly say so, I suspect some of her weekend was spent working. As a former investment banker employed by Citigroup, 100-hour working weeks were the norm. As she grapples with implementing the merger of Discovery and WarnerMedia in Europe, the demands on her time must be considerable.

As for her own viewing habits, over the weekend she's been bingeing on *The Wire* from HBO, *The Marvelous Mrs Maisel* and she admits an addiction to Channel 4's *Come Dine with Me*. “I watch an inordinate amount. It's a show I can put on any time and enjoy.”

She is a fluent communicator who would give Apple Europe creative director Jay Hunt a run for her money in any competition to identify London's fastest-talking media executive.

As the title of this year's London Convention implies, one of the challenges common to all entertainment entities, from Netflix to the BBC, is how to cut through the plethora of content and persuade audiences not to be so promiscuous in their viewing choices, and thus allow media businesses to satisfy their shareholders.

But, in such a dynamic business as television, there is nothing new about having to compete for people's attention, I suggest. “This is not a new battle,” she agrees, “but I would argue the fight for attention has become more intense. We've seen streaming services proliferate, which gives consumers more choice than ever before.

“We also face competition from outside the industry, whether it's gaming, TikTok or YouTube. The competition set has expanded.

“So, as a business and as an industry, we need to think and act differently. How do you start to differentiate yourself with your content, with your IP, with your brands, and break through as part of the social conversation, when there are so many shows being produced?

“People burn through a series a week and then you never hear from them again. We need to think about what sort of content we invest in to meet what the audience is demanding, where we invest, how we exploit our shows across different platforms.



Now TV

And Just Like That...

“How do you use different platforms like social media to support the core businesses?”

This world teeming with content is a universe away from the conservative media environment Dogra grew up with in Delhi in the 1990s. Before cable TV and foreign investment arrived, there were just two indigenous channels on the TV menu. For a child, the week's televisual highlight was an hour of cartoons every Saturday.

But as multichannel TV emerged and she encountered American shows for the first time, she witnessed “the ability of media not just to reflect a society, but to actually shape it”.

Dogra's desire to see the world and her family roots (her parents had lived in Canada before she was born) persuaded her to leave India and attend the University of Toronto, where she read commerce and computer science. “Three years into the degree, I realised I didn't have the passion for computer

science. I realised it wasn't going to be my career and that I wanted to be involved in business,” she recalls.

Landing a job at Citigroup's Technology, Media and Telecoms group (Time Warner was a client) she spent seven years based in the New York, London and Toronto offices.

“Loads of people at my school went into accounting,” she notes. “It wasn't something I was particularly interested in. I had some friends and family who had done investment banking.

“I was young, restless and ambitious, and wanted to live in some different cities. It seemed to be a job that would make use of my skills. I'm built to be analytical and to work hard. I like learning new things.”

She adds: “I really enjoyed my time in banking. You come in with a cohort of peers and you share some formative experiences. Some of the people I worked with then are still among my closest friends.

“This job involves long hours but you’re responsible for teams, I’m responsible for people, I’m responsible for the business. It involves an emotional responsibility that you don’t have when you’re younger.”

In 2009, she joined Time Warner’s mergers and acquisitions group. “These jobs are very much what you make them,” she reflects. “Your experience can be as narrow or as wide as you want it to be. I took the opportunity to wander around the company and ask people questions to find out how things work and what they do as a way to better understand both the detail and the big picture.”



Mare of Easttown

Now TV

Her curiosity paid off. Six years later she was leading the department. One of several coups was persuading online video specialist iStreamPlanet to accept Time Warner’s nearly \$200m offer, beating rivals Comcast and Adobe.

She was reportedly one of only four company insiders to know about the initial negotiations for Time Warner’s proposed merger with AT&T and a key negotiator for the deal, internally code-named Rabbit as a homage to Bugs Bunny.

Previously, she had overseen the company’s investment in Hulu, led Time Warner’s talks for taking a stake in central and eastern European broadcaster CME, and acquired premium football rights in Chile and Argentina.

Her next rung up the corporate ladder was being appointed head of strategy and corporate development. She advised two successive CEOs, John Stankey and Jason Kilar.

Of this role, she explains that it

involved “looking ahead three to five years and asking, what are the things that we should be doing as an industry that people doing their day-to-day jobs might not be thinking about”.

To return to the present, and the vital question of identifying content that cuts through: “How do we select the right kind of content to invest in? As a combined company, Warner Bros Discovery has a huge portfolio. We operate across scripted and unscripted and across film and TV. We also have different platforms.

“We release movies, we have networks, we have services. The first question is: which platform are you

producing for and how do you window that content so that it moves from cinema to, say, networks, and, within that, how do we decide what to produce?”

“Look, our job is to find the best stories, to showcase storytellers, to showcase talent, and it is less about how many shows we produce... The quality of the shows and the quality of the storytelling are paramount.

“When we look at our portfolio, it is not just shows and movies that build on the IP we have. We have DC Comics, Hanna-Barbera, Harry Potter... We have lots of franchises that sit within our business, but it’s also about how you service new stories and how you create completely new worlds.

“I’m not sure there is an answer to exactly how we decide it. But we sort of have a process by which we partner with storytellers and bring things to life in a way that we believe we do differently to others.”

In TV, what’s cutting through right now? “You want to tell stories that people watch in the moment, and they become part of the social conversation, because people like watching shows that other people are watching. That water-cooler effect, right?”

“Also, you want to create shows that people go back to. Some examples of some shows that really cut through: *Succession*, *Game of Thrones*, *And Just Like That...*, the sequel to *Sex and the City*. People then went back and watched *Sex and the City*. This fall, we have *House of the Dragon* coming out, which, by the way, is fantastic.

“These are shows that have cut through and become part of the conversation. If you remember, in one of the lockdowns last year pretty much everyone in the UK was watching *Mare of Easttown*.”

We are seeing something of an arms race as, post-lockdown, the sheer amount of production has reached stratospheric heights – but, with the prospect of a recession, can the eye-watering sums being invested in content stay at this level? “Investors are no longer as tolerant of a lack of profits for a long period of time as they once were. They are demanding business models that are sustainable over shorter periods of time than people had anticipated.

“There are so many shows being produced, so how do you produce shows that break through? No creator wants a show to appear on the carousel and then no one hears from it again. This doesn’t mean that there won’t be robust levels of production, but it will mean that the pace of growth will certainly slow.”

Have we then reached peak scripted? “It’s a hard question to answer,” she concedes, “because a decade ago John Landgraf from FX said we’d reached peak scripted, and we continued to grow from that base.

“I do think the change in investor sentiment means there will be a change in how the industry goes forward. The level of spend cannot continue to increase in the unbounded manner that it has.

“If spend is an indication of what the future looks like, then I certainly don’t think the number of shows will continue to increase at the pace that it has done.” ■

The RTS London Convention 2022 takes place on 27 September.

Don't write off linear yet

DI Ray



Barb's improved audience measurement system shows the streamers are advancing with brilliant originals but still need the support of evergreens

ITV

Accepted TV wisdom says that traditional broadcasting's days are numbered, and the US streamers are taking over. Up to a point, yes, but there's still plenty of life left in television's old guard. And no less an authority than Barb says so.

Taking the most-watched shows in May, Justin Sampson, CEO of the UK's TV ratings body, revealed that there was not a single SVoD show in the top 20 programmes when linear viewing was included. ITV thriller *DI Ray* topped the list, which also included a strong showing from "social glue" programmes, such as the *Eurovision Song Contest* and *Britain's Got Talent*.

"While the SVoD services can be very pleased with some of the viewing numbers they're getting, they'd be much happier with the kind of numbers that are still being generated by the linear broadcasters," said Sampson, speaking at a sold-out RTS London breakfast in July.

What's more, he added, SVoD services "rely on a combination of new

and established content" – just like traditional broadcasters.

TV needs "fireworks and bonfires", he said, explaining: "You need to have bright shows that explode into the schedule and create audiences, while you also need to have content that people keep coming back for. This is something the broadcasters have relied on for many, many years. And guess what? The SVoD services rely on it as well."

Just five streamer shows – *The Big Bang Theory*, *Friends*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, *The Simpsons* and the US version of *The Office* – account for 11% of all SVoD viewing. "For the SVoD services, it's the new stuff that gets all the headlines but, without these five series, their viewing would decline quite dramatically," said Sampson. "[So], to what extent are SVoD services really that different from broadcast services in terms of their reliance on a combination of established and new content?"

As Sampson promised at an earlier RTS event, in April 2021, Barb is now able to publish viewing figures for SVoD and video-sharing services on the same basis as those for broadcast

TV. This enables meaningful comparisons to be made for the first time.

Since November, with ratings from the likes of Netflix, Amazon and YouTube joining the linear schedules, Barb has been providing a more complete picture of the nation's viewing habits.

It has taken Barb longer than it would have liked to start measuring SVoD viewing. The TV ratings body has attached a meter, which reads the URL information for the streaming services, to the wi-fi router at the carefully selected 5,300 homes it uses to represent all segments of UK society. "If we'd had the [streamers'] engagement and involvement, they could [have] helped us do that more quickly," said Sampson.

He added that Barb aims to increase its viewing panel to 7,000 homes, which it should achieve by early 2024.

Barb is using a new definition of "total identified viewing". This is the sum of the time spent watching linear broadcast channels and broadcaster-owned VoD services, 19 streamers (both SVoD and advertising-supported VoD) and video-sharing platforms such as TikTok and YouTube. Barb captures

viewing across four screens — TV sets, tablets, PCs and smartphones — but for streaming and video-sharing services, it can only count viewers via home wi-fi networks. More on which later.

For May, total identified viewing amounted to 224 minutes a day for everyone aged four-plus, comprised of 148 minutes watching traditional broadcasters; 32 minutes for the streamers; and 44 minutes for video-sharing services (see Chart 1).

Some 98% of total broadcast viewing is on a TV set; likewise, 87% of Netflix viewing. TikTok content is at the other extreme, with 94% watched on smartphones. Perhaps surprisingly, YouTube does have a significant TV presence, at around 25%.

Any parents worried that their teenage children may be addicted to video-sharing platforms should stop reading this paragraph now — “10% of YouTube viewers account for half of all its viewing,” said Sampson.

Adults, though, are guilty of bingeing, too — 45% of the 28-day audience for the Ricky Gervais Netflix show *After Life* watched all of the last series within four days of its release in January.

Streamers may not be pushing the linear broadcasters off the TV sofa, but they are taking up more room. According to Barb, 19.6 million homes now subscribe to a SVoD service — a little over two-thirds of the UK’s 28.5 million homes. The most popular is Netflix, followed by Amazon; the fastest growing is Disney+ (see Chart 2).

Some 13.2 million homes have at least two streaming services, about which Sampson opined: “That is on the increase... there is still evidence that people are adding SVoD subscriptions to their portfolio.” Though, as the cost-of-living crisis bites hard this winter, streamers may find they start to lose subscribers.

Much has been written about Netflix being in crisis, having suffered a fall in subscribers and share price this year. In July, Netflix recorded a second quarterly drop in subscriber growth, losing 1 million viewers in the second quarter, although this number is lower than the 2 million it had originally projected.

But Barb figures tell a different story. “The actual subscription levels are tracking well ahead of Netflix’s [UK] pre-pandemic growth levels,” said Sampson. “I believe that the story of Netflix’s subscriptions being now in decline is not the right story — I think it is still heading for subscription growth.”

Chart 1: Barb’s new definition – total identified viewing

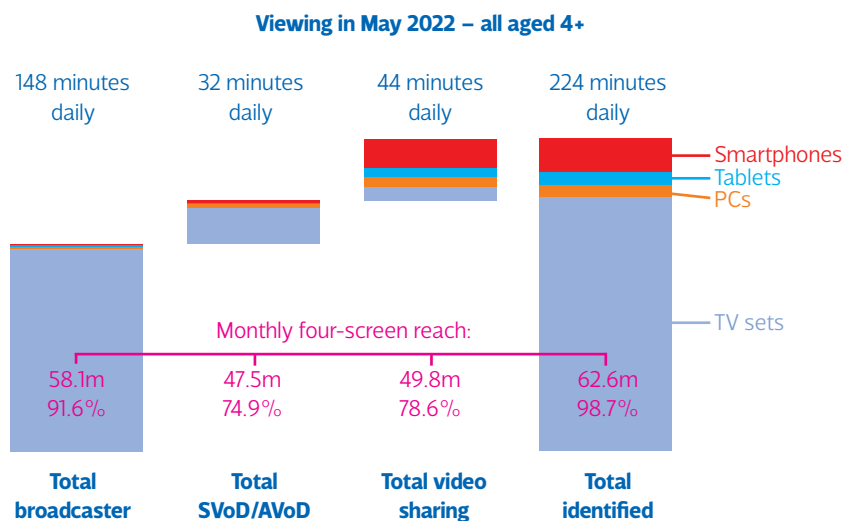
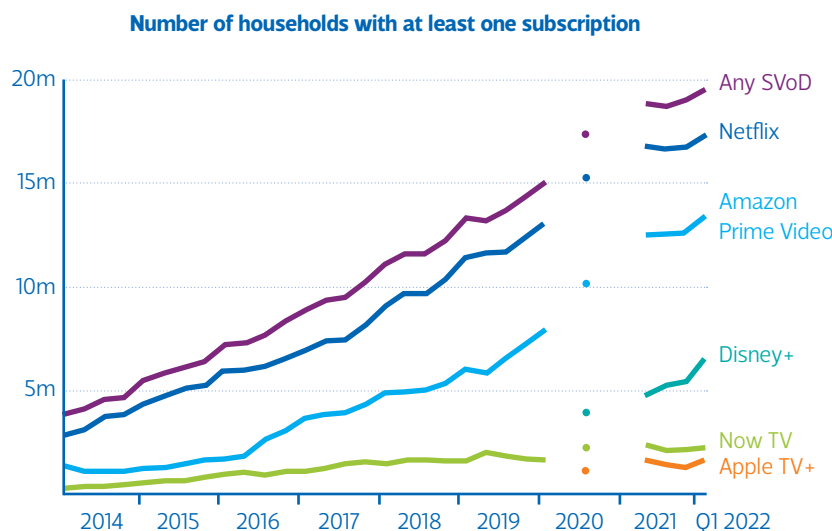


Chart 2: 19.6 million homes subscribed to an SVoD service in Q1 2022



Reliable 2020 figures are unavailable due to the impact of the pandemic on Barb’s information gathering. Source: Barb Establishment Survey.

There are gaps in Barb’s figures — most notably it is unable to collect viewing data on streaming and video-sharing services watched outside the home. “It would be great to have more involvement from the streamers, who are, at the moment, a bit at arm’s length,” said Sampson.

“It’s not a straightforward conversation,” he continued. “These companies are American and they are looking to do things in a way that’s consistent across all markets. While the UK is an important market, the UK, as far as the Americans are concerned, is a part of Europe and we’re a bit further ahead in terms of what we’re doing in the UK

than our counterparts on continental Europe.” In fact, only the US, where Nielsen provides comparable data, has similar SVoD ratings to those provided by Barb.

Sampson concluded: “We’ve got open conversations. Are they going as quickly as I would like? No, but they’re not dead.” ■

Report by Matthew Bell. The RTS London event ‘Breakfast with Barb: Understanding what people watch’ was held at the Soho Hotel in central London on 7 July. It was chaired by the journalist and broadcaster Nadine Dereza, and produced by RTS London Chair Phil Barnes.

When to pull the plug

Why do channels find it so hard to say goodbye to a series? **Matthew Bell** has a few ideas



Neighbours finally checked out over the summer, 37 years and nearly 9,000 episodes after the residents of Ramsay Street first drew TV breath.

The long-running Aussie soap, latterly shown on Channel 5 in the UK, didn't slip away quietly – Kylie Minogue and Jason Donovan returned as Charlene and Scott Robinson, as did Hollywood stars Guy Pearce and Margot Robbie, who began their careers in the fictional town of Erinsborough.

Even fan favourite character Madge Bishop came back from the dead for the double-episode finale, which drew a peak audience of 3 million to Channel 5 at the end of July – the highest audience for the show since the station began screening it in 2008.

Channel 5 boss Ben Frow, chief content officer of channel owner Paramount UK, seemed happy enough: “I suspect there wasn't a dry eye among the viewers as *Neighbours* bowed out on a high last night,” he told *The Guardian*. “I'm sure it will remain in people's hearts and TV memories for a long time to come.” He may miss the ratings, though.

Last March, another long-running show, BBC One hospital drama *Holby City*, had its life support turned off after 23 years and more than 1,100 episodes. Its ending was “dignified”, wrote *The Guardian's* Hannah Verrier, with the weekly drama “going out gracefully... no big disaster, no bomb, no gunman on the loose – just a beautifully and subtly played goodbye”.

An autopsy would record money and politics on their death certificates – *Neighbours* was largely funded by Channel 5, which wants to concentrate its resources on more upmarket, home-grown drama, while *Holby City* (shot at Elstree Studios in Hertfordshire) fell victim to the BBC's drive to make its programme-making more regionally diverse.

When the plug is finally pulled on a TV show, the reason is rarely artistic. Falling ratings, audience ennui, the death of a star actor or the writer, scandal, the above-mentioned money and politics... pretty much anything except the realisation that a show is no longer much good.

Creative decline is usually slow. More rarely, a show “jumps the shark”, succumbing to stunts and novelty as inspiration dries up. This phrase is a

Channel 5

reference to a ludicrous episode from 1970s and 1980s US sitcom *Happy Days*, in which the Fonz (Henry Winkler), in trademark leather jacket, jumped over a shark on water skis.

Mostly, though, shows struggle on, even when they have become a pale shadow or worse, a parody, of their former selves. *Killing Eve* is perhaps the best recent example of a series that lost its way yet was allowed to continue while audience interest flagged. “Not so much a cat-and-mouse game between Villanelle and Eve as a moggie chasing its tail in circles,” said Ben Dowell, TV writer at *The Times*, commenting on this year’s fourth and, thankfully, final series.

Even Steven Knight’s hitherto majestic *Peaky Blinders* meandered during its final run, perhaps missing family matriarch Polly Gray, following the death of the wonderful Helen McCrory. It remained a visual and aural treat, but the narrative frequently felt confused.

Factual entertainment programmes tend to go on for ever; some deservedly, such as *The Great British Bake Off*, which has been on air for 12 years and almost 150 episodes; others less so, like *The Apprentice*. To be fair to BBC commissioners, *The Apprentice*’s ratings have held up remarkably well over 17 years and 200-plus episodes. On average, episodes averaged 7 million viewers across this year’s series as, once again, Lord Sugar fired a succession of hopeless narcissists.

The critics were less kind. “This clapped-out format is looking more knackered than its 74-year-old figurehead,” wrote *The Daily Telegraph*’s Michael Hogan. He suggested that the BBC “either put it out of its misery or demand a major revamp to drag it into the 21st century”.

Too few telly people know when to finish a series. Ricky Gervais is one who does. From his first show, *The Office*, to his most recent, *After Life*, none has overstayed their welcome. On stopping the latter after three short series on Netflix, Gervais said: “It seems mad on every level, but I think it’s the right decision artistically. It’s a finite story, and that’s its strength.”

Decades ago, John Cleese was another who knew when to say enough, ending what became the nation’s favourite sitcom, *Fawlty Towers*, after just two series and 12 episodes.

Meanwhile, Lee Mack’s underwhelming *Not Going Out* – currently the

longest-running sitcom on UK telly – recently notched up its 12th series on BBC One.

In pre-streaming days, when a show appeared in the schedules for one night only, poor overnight ratings would kill it off before it had the chance to build an audience. A programme that might have built on a creatively promising, if underperforming, first series never got the chance to do so.

This is rarer nowadays, but it still happens. *Semi-Detached*, a far superior Lee Mack sitcom, was axed last year after just one series on BBC Two. Many

Victorian crime drama *Ripper Street*, starring Matthew Macfadyen, MyAnna Buring and Jerome Flynn, immediately found a new backer in Amazon Prime when the BBC unaccountably axed it.

Channel 4 cancelled *Top Boy* and that appeared to be the end for the gritty London crime series, created by celebrated Irish writer Ronan Bennett and starring Ashley Walters. Yet, six years later, encouraged by Canadian rapper and super-fan Drake, Netflix brought it back. Drake even nabbed himself an executive producer credit on the returning series.



critics liked it – “a masterclass in chaotic comedy”, said *The Guardian* – but it was sunk by poor audiences; its overnight ratings were only around 400,000 viewers.

Generally, with the advent of BBC iPlayer, All 4, Netflix, Disney+ and the rest of the streaming world, a programme now has more time to find its feet. Word of mouth or social media chit-chat can create a buzz, and on-demand audiences can grow.

Shows undeservedly killed off can find new life on a new channel. Once upon a time, when TV channels were few and far between, this was more difficult, though Simon Nye’s laddish sitcom *Men Behaving Badly*, after flopping on ITV, found fame and fortune on BBC One in the 1990s.

Some series refuse to die. Ditched first by Channel 4 and then Channel 5, Orwellian TV nightmare *Big Brother* is set to return to ITV2 next year.

Eventually, if the plug isn’t pulled on a programme, it can become a TV institution. Eight have racked up 60-plus, unbroken years on British TV. BBC current affairs programme *Panorama* is the oldest, having been on air since the year of the Queen’s coronation, 1953.

A few are niche – *The Sky at Night* and Welsh-language religious series *Dechrau Canu*, *Dechrau Canmol* – but the country would rise from its sofa as one if either the *Eurovision Song Contest*, *Coronation Street* or *Blue Peter* were axed. Commissioners wouldn’t dare – would they? ■

OUR FRIEND IN IRELAND

For more than two years, the scene here in Ireland has been dark and gloomy. The pandemic has cast its pall across the landscape, particularly over the fields of entertainment – theatre, film, TV and video.

Now we are emerging, blinking, into the sun again and, very quickly, all is busy, busy, busy. Celebrities such as Tom Cruise, Russell Crowe, Bill Murray, Matthew Broderick and Sarah Jessica Parker have been spotted across the island but, for sheer glittering global star power, nothing can beat the Obamas, whose latest production, *Bodkin*, is shooting in West Cork, Dublin and Wicklow.

Described as “a darkly comedic thriller”, it is the first scripted TV series from their production company, Higher Ground, and one of several shows it is making for Netflix.

On the film scene, all the buzz surrounds *An Cailín Ciúin (The Quiet Girl)*, Colm Bairéad’s beautiful and moving film based on a short story by Claire Keegan. It has been described as “an instant classic”. According to one insider, it marks a turning point in the Irish film industry, especially for productions in the Irish language.

It is also a success story for TG4, Ireland’s Irish-language channel, whose film offshoot, Cine4, is a major funder. This will be Ireland’s entry for the International Features category at the next Oscars. We have great hopes for this one.

On the television front, both TG4 and Virgin Media have launched new

Agnes Cogan
identifies a possible
future Oscar winner
as the Irish screen
sector adds new
production capacity



Agnes Cogan

TV channels: Virgin Media’s is a general entertainment channel, while TG4’s is for children.

To support all this extra programming and production, planning is under way for two major TV and film studios – in Mullingar, in the Midlands, and in Greystones, a seaside resort in County Wicklow, about 30km south of Dublin. Each claims it will be the biggest studio complex in the country. We’ll see.

In any case, these initiatives will provide more work for crews and technicians, and added capacity for production companies, all of which will be very welcome.

As befits a scene emerging from the shadows, many of the productions underway have a supernatural aura:

The Pope’s Exorcist, starring Russell Crowe, is seeking extras; *Sanctuary* deals with present-day witchcraft and is a co-production with AMC and Monument TV, among others.

At the other end of the scale, in Galway, as part of the summer’s Galway City of Film Festival, 10 teams competed to write, shoot and edit a five-minute film in just 48 hours. Sponsored by TG4, this was the fifth year that the 48-hour challenge has been held.

In other news, Paul Mescal, breakout star of *Normal People*, has been kept busy. His latest film, *God’s Creatures*, also starring Emily Watson, was selected at Cannes, and will be shown in cinemas at the end of September.

The crime series *Kin*, Ireland’s most successful TV drama of 2021, starring Aidan Gillen and Ciarán Hinds, has been given the go-ahead for a second and third series. These are being shot back to back this year, and provide lots of welcome work for local actors, technicians and production staff.

All this and an announcement by the redoubtable Sir David Attenborough, now 96, who is to present a nature series for BBC One, *Wild Isles*, on the wildlife of Britain and Ireland.

The programme will be filmed here and in Britain over three years and will feature “extraordinary animal dramas and wildlife spectacles” to demonstrate the challenges to nature and the global importance of some of the wildlife on these islands. More power to him! ■

Agnes Cogan is Chair of RTS Republic of Ireland.



Searching for snow leopards: UKTV/BBC/PBS co-production Kyrgyzstan: Expedition Mountain Ghost

UKTV

Natural history's green challenge

Seven years ago, documentary producer Tom Mustill was kayaking with a friend in Monterey Bay, California, when an adult humpback whale breached beside them, landing on their kayak. They were forced underwater and narrowly avoided being crushed by the whale. Fortunately, he and his friend escaped uninjured.

Today, Mustill is one of a growing number of wildlife film-makers and production company owners who are determined to ward off an even bigger threat than animal encounters in the wild and, by making films that are genuinely sustainable, play their part in ameliorating the impact of climate change.

An ambassador for sustainable production certification scheme Albert

Steve Clarke investigates how wildlife programme-makers are working to cut their carbon footprint

and a proponent of low-carbon film-making, Mustill has worked with such committed conservationists as David Attenborough, Greta Thunberg, Stephen Fry and George Monbiot. He co-hosts the podcast *So Hot Right Now* with journalist Lucy Siegle and, in 2018, produced the first edition of BBC Two's *Natural World* strand to receive Albert certification, *Humpback Whales: A Detective Story*, filmed on the US west coast.

Knowing that a return flight to California to film would itself be responsible for emitting more CO₂ than many people in the developing world emit in a year, Mustill sat down with his team and came up with ways to reduce the programme's carbon footprint. "Instead of it coming from the top down, we were forced to think about the things that we were responsible for," he recalls. "The camera operator took a small amount of kit and used lightweight gear that took up less space. We persuaded the BBC to take paperless deliverables; our release forms were digital. The whole production used just one ream of paper. We avoided using disposable batteries or any other disposable pieces of equipment."

But, as the effects of man-made climate change become alarmingly ubiquitous, is there a growing >



BBC commission *Humpback Whales: A Detective Story*

BBC

› consensus that more far-reaching measures are required by everyone in natural history film-making to move on to a more sustainable footing? It is ironic that the production of blue-chip wildlife documentaries is highly carbon intensive: programme-makers criss-cross the globe in search of the perfect shot, even as they seek to reinforce environmental messaging.

As Mustill says: “The elephant in the room in natural history making is that the elephant is in someone else’s room. Why is it that huge numbers of British people fly from Bristol to film other people’s natural history? Lots of us are aware that this is unsustainable and not very fair. How do we move beyond this model?”

Ignorance is no longer an excuse: Albert has the facts at its fingertips, says Kristina Turner, an assistant producer and co-founder of grassroots group Filmmakers for Future: Wildlife (FF:W), which boasts more than 250 members in the UK and overseas.

“Back in March 2020, we asked Albert to help us clarify the footprint of natural history TV as we’re often lumped in with specialist and/or international factual,” explains Turner. “Albert [said]

‘HAVE WE EVER CONSIDERED THAT WE’RE MAKING TOO MUCH TELEVISION?’

that our big-budget international wildlife series have the highest carbon footprint of any TV genre, on a par with the big-budget drama feature films.”

She adds: “At that point, data collected by Albert between 2012 and 2020 showed the biggest overall carbon footprint for a wildlife documentary series was over 2,400 tCO₂e [tonnes of CO₂ equivalent].”

“This was a large-scale international production, with 60% of the impact being travel. It was the equivalent of powering 545 homes for a year.”*

FF:W encourages collaboration across the sector to explore ways to

* Based on a house’s energy footprint being around 4.4 tCO₂e per year. Source: We are Albert, 2020.

reduce its footprint – something that Turner stresses is already happening – and at the same time make more-impactful content and move away from what the group describes as “the extractive film-making model”.

“Reducing our carbon is obviously important, but we also have a huge opportunity to do more with our content to help in the current ecological emergency,” says Turner.

Should high-end natural history series, which the streamers have embraced with a vengeance, make way for less polluting types of wildlife programmes? “There are definitely new ways of working emerging, many of them in the past two years due to the pandemic,” says Wendy Darke, head of the BBC’s Natural History Unit from 2012 to 2016, when flagship films such as *Planet Earth II* and *Blue Planet II* were made.

Turner believes that, “if we continue to make blue-chip series, we need to be making them in a very different way. Personally, I feel we could be making less of that type and have more variety in the programmes we make.

“We need to be helping people see



Sky/Netflix co-production *Predators*

Sky

series and, by partnering with Natural Capital Partners, a portion of the budget went to support communities in Borneo to help protect orangutans living in the rainforest.”

With more and more broadcasters and streamers signing up to net zero pledges by 2030, production companies have an incentive to offset the carbon they create when they make a show.

However, some in the UK’s natural history film-making community think that more radical action is required to reduce the footprint of wildlife shows.

“There will always be an element of travel involved but, at the moment, we just have this relentless churn of too much content,” says Mustill, who set up Gripping Films in 2012. “Have we ever considered that we’re making too much television?”

“Every film has a footprint, whether it’s made locally or not. Every time it’s streamed it has a footprint. There’s so much stuff being made. It’s endless. All of this comes at a cost. Should we have some sort of limit on the amount of content that is made?”

“Many people make wildlife films because they want to serve nature and share the wonder of the living world. They become disillusioned when they find they’ve joined a massive industry aimed at generating as much content as it can, with companies interested in growing their stake in that.”

At the very least, Mustill advocates greater use of recycled footage – a recent film he made for Greta Thunberg, *Nature Now*, deployed a lot of recycled material. “Reusing existing footage and upcycling it into exciting new content clearly works because it was one of the most viral environmental films [it registered more than 80 million views] of all time,” he says.

Others, however, maintain that, if there is to be a sea change in making natural history more sustainable, it needs to start at the top.

“Maybe commissioners need to scale back their ideas and to think about the kind of films they want to make from the point of view of, ‘Can we make films that don’t need all the stuff reshoot all over again?’ and rely more on archive,” says Allan. “The BBC doesn’t make these films for the good of the planet. It makes them because they make a fortune.” ■

An RTS event, ‘Sustainable TV production at home and abroad – myth or reality?’, will be held in central London on 6 December.

ourselves as part of nature rather than separate from it.”

Cutting down on travel is one way to be more sustainable. Film-makers looking for that elusive footage of a snow leopard or a bird of paradise were forced by the pandemic to fly a lot less. “Covid brought about something that was long overdue – giving foreign crews the chance to do some wildlife shoots,” says veteran wildlife cameraman and photographer Doug Allan, best known for his work in the polar regions and underwater. “It is true that the bulk of the talent for these high-end wildlife films is based disproportionately in the UK, Europe and the US. It doesn’t mean there aren’t talented people elsewhere.”

Employing more locally based crews, including overseas camera operators, has been “an absolute positive”, says Darke, who runs Bristol-based indie True to Nature, which specialises in wildlife and underwater filming. For *Shark with Steve Backshall*, the company worked with US-based camera operator Duncan Brake, rather than flying out a Brit.

Another way to cut a film’s carbon footprint is to shoot share – in other

words, use one crew instead of two to film two or more series on the same trip.

Also, more meetings are taking place virtually. “We brokered the co-production deal for the *Predators* premium nature series between Sky and Netflix largely on Zoom,” says Darke. “We’ve shown that you can build business and editorial relationships via video conferencing, which significantly reduces the amount of travel that we might have done otherwise.”

Directors have also learnt to work virtually. “We’ve been directing camera ops in the Pacific Islands, admittedly at 2:00am, on Zoom, and we’ve proved that this can be done successfully.”

But isn’t there a temptation to start travelling again simply because human beings are social animals? “Yes, but we need to be mindful of our carbon footprint and I think the way forward involves a hybrid model where we take full advantage of locally based talent and the significant developments that have been made in remote-working technology in the last two years. This approach was illustrated by True to Nature in delivering series 1 of *Expedition*, commissioned by UKTV.

“We were the first fully offset UKTV



Aidan Turner as Dr Joe O'Loughlin in *The Suspect*

ITV

Did he dunnit?

ITV's new thriller *The Suspect*, starring Aidan Turner, twists some of the genre's conventions. **Shilpa Ganatra** discovers how it was done

If there's one thing us Brits know how to do well – apart from make a mean cup of tea and queue politely – it's how to make a compelling TV crime drama. In recent years, the likes of *Killing Eve*, *Line of Duty*, *Informer*, *Bodyguard* and *The Responder* have all been jewels in prime-time schedules and reliable exports. But this has consequences for developing a new series as producers needs to offer something a little different.

Enter *The Suspect*, based on Michael Robotham's 2004 bestseller. Set in central London, it follows clinical psychologist Joe O'Loughlin (played by *Poldark*'s Aidan Turner) as he joins

forces with detectives Vincent Ruiz (Shaun Parkes) and Riya Devi (Anjali Mohindra) to solve the case of a brutally murdered woman.

But it turns out that things may not be all they seem when we discover that our hero knows more about the case than he initially lets on. The big question of this whodunnit then becomes: did he dunnit?

After a screening of the first episode in London, Jake Lushington, head of drama at World Productions (responsible for *Line of Duty*, *Vigil* and *Save Me*) explained to the RTS that it's a small but fundamental twist on the ever-popular genre: "It is interesting, how do you make crime different? You

think, 'Well, let's set it on Mars'. But actually... not letting the audience know who your good guy is and who's the bad guy, is just as radical."

We see this played out in a nail-biting scene in the first episode, in which O'Loughlin, the honest chap he appears, visits Ruiz at the police station to volunteer the information that he was near the graveyard where the body was found. But, as they speak, Ruiz finds out that O'Loughlin has been lying about another aspect of the investigation.

The premise relies on maintaining tension, so that the viewer never knows which way the story will fall. In turn, that relies on clever direction, scripting and editing (as one unobvious clue too

many can give the game away), as well as the skill of the lead actor, Turner.

"You can only play Joe's truth,"

Turner says of the acting challenge. "I had to be careful about any of that disingenuous stuff, the hoodwinking of the audience. If it's naturally captured, absolutely, it feels right. But for me, I can never be, like, 'Here's my evil look, here's my confused look'. Everything had to be steeped in truth."

A fan of the book already, Lushington lost out the first time that the rights were on the table. But it was second time lucky and, once the rights were acquired, he swiftly brought on Peter Berry (*Gangs of London*, *The Last Enemy*) as writer, and James Strong (*Broadchurch*, *Vanity Fair*) as lead director, with whom he had worked on *Vigil*.

ITV, too, got on board quickly and gave the creative team the freedom it needed. "That's the great thing about working with ITV," says Lushington. "It gave us two or three key notes but didn't micromanage at all. Most [of its input] related to what we knew about Joe and how far we could push that. They were good notes, which affected the middle of the series quite a lot. After that, it wasn't, like, 'Show us your homework when you've done it'."

Key to the tone of the show was the main location of central London. With cramped pubs, a hotchpotch of architecture, and London Bridge in the background, *The Suspect* is firmly rooted in today's capital. While it added "a huge amount" to the budget, says Lushington, that wasn't the only issue the production team faced due to the built-up location.

Now that almost every spare patch of land in London has been developed, the main problem was the lack of available unit bases. Strong explains: "There are lots of things now filming in London, so the competition for these unit bases becomes tough. You have to be lean and mean and as efficient as you can be."

For example, when filming in a building opposite the Shard, "we couldn't get all the make-up, costume and lighting trucks that close. So they had to come in early, drop everything off, and we did hair, make-up and costume on another floor in the building.

Initially, you're like, 'Is this too much hassle?'. But when you see it on screen, you realise that it's worth pushing that extra bit."

Reflecting contemporary London,

the diverse cast – including ethnic-minority background actors and a disabled technician – adds to the series' authenticity. Shaun Parkes says: "It wasn't done in a worthy way where, when you're watching it, that's all you'll be thinking about. It was just done in a way that represents London now. I've been waiting for many years to be in things that just represent the world that we see every day. Whenever that turns up, it's another reason to do a project like this."

Another case in point is the dramatic opening scene starring newcomer Gabin Kongolo as Malcolm, a suicidal terminally ill patient talked off a hospital ledge by O'Loughlin, who happens to be in the vicinity. "We didn't consider that Malcolm had to be

really walking me out. That was an interesting day."

The idea to source real-life specialists came from Strong's work in drama documentaries. "We couldn't afford real actors to do reconstructions, so we'd get the real police officers to do it, or the real soldiers," he explains.

"Whenever there's an emergency service, or army scene, it helps to get real people to come in. And they're not nervous at all, because they do it every day. I remember in *Liar*, in the scene where Joanne Froggatt is examined after being raped, it's a real rape nurse that features. She dealt with Jo exactly as if she was a patient.

"But it's a tricky one, because the second you ask them to do something that's outside of their comfort zone,



Shaun Parkes as DI Ruiz and Anjali Mohindra as DS Devi in *The Suspect*

ITV

played by a diverse actor. He was just bloody brilliant," says Lushington. "He was still at drama school, so we had to get him out of school, and he knocks it out of the park. When that happens, it's one of the more thrilling things of my job."

Taking realism one step further in that scene, the firefighters who brief O'Loughlin as he walks out to the ledge (much needed, as Turner did a lot of the action himself, despite being scared of heights) were sourced directly from London Fire Brigade. Says Turner: "I thought he was an actor, and I said, 'you're really good'. And he said [putting on a nonchalant inner-London accent], 'I've done this before, mate'. It felt so real, like he was

they don't know what to do. You've got to be careful."

Lushington agrees: "When you're working on the nuance of the everyday, the actors know how to get the most juice, and how to make them different or special. It's a trade-off between those two things."

Looking ahead, it's something of a spoiler that *The Suspect* is the first of a Joe O'Loughlin book series (for which World Productions owns the TV rights), but, as Lushington points out, "you still don't know what happens to Joe and what Joe's done". Yet it all points to the likelihood that it won't be the last we'll see of Joe and the detectives – much to the delight of the hordes of TV crime fans everywhere. ■

There's nothing quite like an authentic slice-of-life drama to elicit a connection with viewers. Over the course of a well-crafted series that is rooted in realism, the audience is bound to empathise with its uncomfortable truths. Those familiar feelings, familiar failings.

We saw that in *Catastrophe*, which expertly depicted the ups and downs of a relationship after the gloss has gone. Or *Together*, which intimately documented a couple having to cope with the mundanity of life during lockdown while also facing a terrifying global pandemic. There are even examples without Sharon Horgan in them – in *Normal People*, it was the all-too-relatable unspoken tension between young students Marianne and Connell that gripped the nation.

But, so far, no UK series has drawn on what is arguably the most obvious context for realism: an everyday couple, 27 long and eventful years after they first said “I do”.

Marriage, created, written and directed by Stefan Golaszewski, whose credits include the RTS-award winning *Mum*, and produced by The Forge, aims to change that in the most compelling of ways.

The series follows the subtle interplay over the course of a few days as Ian, played by Sean Bean (twice an RTS acting award winner, for *The Accused* and *Time*), is made redundant from his job just as the career of his wife, Emma, played by Nicola Walker (*The Split*, *Unforgotten*), gains momentum.

“The format of drama now means that something has to happen at a certain point in each episode every week,” Walker pointed out at a recent RTS event, where she was joined by Golaszewski and Bean.

“When I read these scripts, I thought, ‘here’s Stefan rejecting that pattern and writing about these two people in the most honest way’. Awful things have happened to them in their 27-year marriage. That isn’t where we meet them, but you do see the effect that has realistically in a long-term loving relationship. It’s both difficult and joyful. A lot of the time, it’s just life lived. I have not seen that on television before.”

Bean agreed. “It was like nothing I’d ever read before, and I always like something that’s different. You read a lot of scripts, and some of them are very good scripts, but they don’t have



The RTS lifts the lid on **Stefan Golaszewski's** new series, *Marriage*, a bittersweet portrait of a couple who tied the knot 27 years ago

Marriage

BBC

A real relationship drama

that amount of detail or description or subtlety.”

Given the volume of screen hours dedicated to couples, it seemed strange to Golaszewski that, until now, long-term marriages were only depicted in a heightened way that was out of sync with our experience.

“Often, you find in fiction that marriages are things that people are desperate to get out of, or terribly sad in. People seem to be keen to cheat quite a lot,” he said. “Yet, when you look around, you see all these people just trying their best, and finding things hard and getting things wrong, but acting out of hope rather than malice. I wanted to tell that story.”

You’d never guess it from Walker and Bean’s effortless chemistry on-screen, but *Marriage* is the first time the pair have worked together. It helped their dynamic, said Walker, that they were given a full week of rehearsals before cameras rolled, “which is unheard of now. I remember doing it when I first started acting, when I was 22, but that has long since become a thing of the past. So, that was incredibly helpful.”

Recalling the rehearsal week, Bean added: “We clicked pretty quickly, and we got to know each other, but we were very focused on our work. It felt natural and we had a wonderful chemistry.”

It was at this point of the process that the characters were fleshed out in full. For example, with Bean’s input, they decided on Ian’s former job. “I never write biographies,” explained Golaszewski. “I’ve often been told in the past to write down what the characters like. I don’t like doing that either, because you meet someone one day and they’ve changed the next because of what’s happened to them in the intervening period. Pinning someone down with some adjectives isn’t very truthful. You end up blocking the actors in as well, because it is they who bring the life to it.”

While perhaps not intended at the time of conception, the relatability of the four-part series to its audience has increased as redundancy becomes a growing threat.

“I guess a lot of people these days are facing that, especially people in their fifties and sixties who are still competent and able-bodied but for some reason, maybe it’s technology, lose their jobs,” said Bean. “You leave Friday night and that’s it, it’s all gone. You have to cope with filling up 24 hours a day and feeling as though you’re



Nicola Walker as Emma

BBC

getting in the way in the house and getting under the wife’s feet.”

Equally, the work ethic rarely disappears with the work. “Ian goes into the garden a lot, he goes into his shed, starts painting things, hoovering, killing ants, stuff like that. Worthy things that are necessary for a man to do.”

And, as Emma finds work opportunities opening up, “he feels as though he can’t speak to her because she’s always too busy now, and he doesn’t want to spoil that dream for her because he loves her. He’s happy for her but, at the same time, he’s quite jealous.”

For Walker, playing Emma at an



Sean Bean as Ian

BBC

important time in her career was another example of the realism involved. “The different personalities we are with different people is brilliantly illustrated with Emma,” she said. “The Emma that we see at work is a completely different woman to the Emma at home and the Emma with her dad. It’s [about] playing a fully rounded individual, because she has lots of different faces.”

Personalities and the interplays between them have already proved to be a strength of Golaszewski’s, as demonstrated in his sitcoms *Him & Her* (starring Russell Tovey and Sarah Solemani) and *Mum*, which also won an RTS award for lead actor Lesley Manville. But after their successes, he pressed pause and reconsidered the art of television writing. His conclusion?

Dramas today are restricted from showing real-life interactions because of their emphasis on plot and structure.

Instead, *Marriage* sought to put the truthful relationships between characters at the core of the show, and use plot as a device, rather than the other way around.

Walker highlighted an example in a scene where Ian seems to have made a little headway in his sensitive relationship with daughter Jessica: “There’s a moment when Ian makes a joke, and it’s received really well by his daughter. Normally, in drama, that’s your end point – that the father who’s found it difficult to speak to his daughter cracks a joke, and everything’s better. A great example of what Stefan does [is that] he has Ian say the joke again because the joke has gone well. It’s so painful. I’ve seen members of my family do that at family dinners.”

Marriage shows how a relationship is more than the sum of its parts.

“When I was writing the sitcoms, people seemed to be interested that it was funny one minute and sad the next,” said Golaszewski. “But, if you’re just doing your best to tell the truth, sometimes that will emanate as funny and sometimes it will emanate as sad. Sometimes, it will emanate as something enormous and sometimes as Ian moving Emma’s shoes yet again. Those are the little bits of detritus that our lives are built of.” ■

Report by Shilpa Ganatra. ‘Marriage – Preview Q&A’ was an RTS event held on 9 August. It was hosted by journalist Emma Bullimore and produced by Harriet Wilson, BBC drama publicist.

A catastrophe waiting to happen



The Undeclared War

Channel 4

Because it's terrifying," was Peter Kosminsky's no-holds-barred answer when I ask him why he would take on the knotty problem – televisually as much as narratively – of bringing cyber conflict to the screen, before he expanded on the dire potential real-life consequences for us all.

"If another country – let's call it Russia, but it's certainly not the only one – attacks this country and we retaliate within the cyber domain, it will counter-attack again with a more serious cyberattack," he explains. "It escalates one step after another step, with a sort of horrible inevitability.

"We are a very interconnected world and a little bit of malware launched against some part of our critical national infrastructure, such as our electricity, our water or our communications, can cripple the way of life we in Britain know and have come to take for granted. So it seems to me to be a

The RTS hears why Peter Kosminsky's cyber drama, *The Undeclared War*, is a warning to politicians to act before it's too late

really important and valid subject for a TV drama."

Thus motivated and armed with the mountain of research notes for which he is known on previous projects (*The Promise*, *Wolf Hall*, *The Government Inspector*), Kosminsky went with co-creator Colin Callender to set out their stall for a near-future cyber thriller to Channel 4, where they found a very receptive ear in head of drama Caroline Hollick.

Speaking at an RTS event in mid-August about the making of the show, she said: "I was a few weeks into the job, it was very new to me, and I

received Peter's extraordinary research document, which, I think, was 54 pages. I remember my heart sank slightly and I thought, "How am I going to get through this?" And then I was completely compelled – gripped – just by the revelatory detail that Peter had uncovered about what was happening.

"It does feel like we're setting off a klaxon, telling [people]: 'You need to be aware of what's going on.' And that makes it irresistible to Channel 4, where we're always trying to be at the cutting edge, we're always trying to be revelatory and to shine a light on who we are today.

"I feel that Channel 4 should go to a place that other people won't or haven't thought of doing. Peter has always brought us something new – a Peter Kosminsky show always feels like it's got the DNA of Channel 4 built into it."

Key to the success of the project was casting, with Kosminsky and Callender's creative record making it an attractive prospect for Simon Pegg, Adrian Lester,

Alex Jennings and the director's regular stable partner, Mark Rylance.

Surrounded by all those familiar faces was a brand new one, Hannah Khalique-Brown. She plays 21-year-old GCHQ intern Saara Parvin, who suddenly finds herself on the front line of high-stakes cyberwarfare, her skills belying her naivety and bemusing her seniors.

She had only been acting professionally for a year before her audition tape landed on Kosminsky's desk. He was immediately convinced and remembered: "I showed Hannah's first audition to Colin, without telling him what I thought. There were about five names in the final list, and he said straight away, 'What's the debate? There's only one!'"

Khalique-Brown agreed her experience of going on set alongside the veteran talents of Rylance, Pegg and co matched her character's experience of entering GCHQ the first time: "There were many moments where I felt very much in parallel with Saara, which was a great extra kind of companionship to have with her."

The actress proved her chops, however, when the never knowingly underprepared Kosminsky suggested she might familiarise herself with coding for the role, even delving into reverse engineering, a subject that is woven throughout the narrative.

She recalled: "Peter and I talked about practising typing every day so that I could get really proficient, because these people there, it's second nature to them.

"I really love challenges so I went full steam ahead and decided to learn a couple of program mergers. I taught myself JavaScript and C++ via an online course, and I did some projects with them which is the only way to really cement your knowledge of coding."

Besides his actors looking the part, another challenge of bringing coding to screen is working out how to keep the viewer involved. "It's not my natural milieu," Kosminsky conceded. "I was thinking, how do I make this interesting and entertaining for the audience?"

His answer was to come up with a series of visual rooms, archives and libraries to serve as a metaphor for Parvin's mental calculations. The idea went down a treat when he nervously offered it up for Hollick's inspection.

"It was just so innovative, I just felt like I hadn't seen it before," she remembers. "Yet the language that

Peter uses to create code world makes total sense, and it solved one of the big challenges of *The Undeclared War*, which is that it is quite an interior piece. It not only gave you these visual moments, but for someone like me, who had absolutely no experience of coding whatsoever, it took me by the hand through that process."

Another challenge was setting the narrative in the near future of 2024, a decision down to Kosminsky's political curiosity. He explained: "The Russians fiddled with an American election, and I wondered, what if they tried to fiddle in an even more profound way in ours? Not so much to alter the outcome but to just increase that lack of trust in our own institutions and con-



Channel 4

tempt for authority, which is their stock in trade. So that meant, you know, a quick trip to Google to find out when the election would be... it is likely to be in May 2024, so that was the first thing."

Callender added: "It allows familiarity with a little bit of dramatic licence. We wanted to root it and ground it in the world that we live in today, but with the licence to explore the various things that could happen."

For a story first outlined before the Brexit referendum, Kosminsky's narrative is remarkably prescient – referencing Boris Johnson's departure 15 months previously and the possibility of his being replaced by a privileged person of colour. How did Kosminsky know all this?

He laughs: "Well you know, you can hope! Did I think Boris would stay the course? I always thought he would burn out, I knew he was a... I don't want to bring a libel down on your head but I don't think there's any

debate about whether he's been economical with the truth from time to time in his career. I just didn't think he would manage to survive, it was just a gut instinct."

Kosminsky would not be drawn on which people at GCHQ and other centres of power helped him construct such a realistic narrative, only revealing: "You would be surprised at some of the people who are prepared to talk for drama – it's drama's hidden secret weapon, really."

After such a positive reception for the first six episodes, Hollick made no secret of her desire for the series to return: "The ambition for *Undeclared War* has always been that it would be a returning series. It's an incredible

premise, I think... it's opened the door to telling really revelatory stories on a kind of epic global scale; watch this space is all I can say. Nothing's returnable until it returns, but definitely the ambition is there."

It's a dense, complex topic to be sure, but Kosminsky was clear on the one thing he'd like viewers to take away: "I think we're sleepwalking into something catastrophic. In among all the other threats we face as a society, not least the desperate effects of climate change, this is one of the most serious, so I've used the power of the drama medium, with my colleagues, to draw attention to this threat that we face, in the hope that some kind of avoiding action will be taken." ■

Report by Caroline Frost, who hosted the RTS session on *The Undeclared War* on 16 August. The producer was Monique Levine from DDA. Viewers in the UK can watch all episodes of *The Undeclared War* on All 4.



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Jahreal Wright: one of the joint winners this year

Paul Hampartsoumian

Next-generation techs

RTS Awards Sky's Jahreal Wright and Timeline TV's Jonathan Chappell-Seetayah are the joint holders of the RTS Young Technologist of the Year Award 2022 – the first time the society has named two winners of this prestigious award.

Dock10's Andrew Ware was announced as the runner-up at a special central London event in July, hosted by digital executive producer Muki Kulhan. Ware receives the Coffey Award for Excellence in Technology.

Wright, a graduate of the Mama Youth Project, is a user support specialist at Sky and has worked on Formula 1 and Premier League football. Chappell-Seetayah started his career at the BBC on its

broadcast engineering degree apprenticeship.

Terry Marsh, Chair of the awards jury, said: "Jahreal and Jonathan demonstrated... the drive to move the industry and technology forwards and to be an integral part of the UK production community for years to come." They receive an all-expenses-paid trip to IBC 2022 and an invitation to the RTS London Convention.

The award was established by the RTS with funds from the family of the engineer AM Beresford-Cooke.

Ahead of the presentation, a panel, chaired by Kulhan, looked at the future of the TV industry, including remote production, image robotics and live broadcasts.

The panellists were: Claire Wilkie, MD of Limitless

Broadcast; Mo-Sys Engineering product manager Florian Gallier; and the 2020 RTS Young Technologist of the Year, Krystel Richards.

Delivering a keynote speech on entrepreneurship, Wilkie revealed that she started the outside broadcast company Limitless a decade ago at the age of just 23. She said: "I want to make people feel they can achieve whatever they put their mind to... that they can livestream off the top of mountains, do drone shows over 5G, that they can change the game in sports broadcasting with remote production and the cloud.

"We pioneer at the frontier of technology. We're not afraid to step out there, do the R&D and then bring it to market."

Matthew Bell

Gerhard Zeiler to speak at RTS convention

London Convention New speakers have been added to an already impressive roster of names at the Society's London Convention, "The fight for attention", at the end of this month. They include Gerhard Zeiler, President, International, Warner Bros Discovery, as an international keynote speaker.

"Our programme for the London Convention 2022 is taking great shape and is set to be an unmissable touch-point in the calendar," said Theresa Wise, CEO of the Royal Television Society. "We are delighted the esteemed Gerhard Zeiler will be joining us and look forward to

hearing his and all of the speakers' insights on the international TV landscape and the 'fight for attention.'"

Speakers added include four from multinational news channel CNN: senior producer Barbara Arvanitidis; chief international investigative correspondent Nima Elbagir, and investigative producers Gianluca Mezzofiore and Katie Polglase.

Other names revealed are: Ofcom Chair Michael Grade; Maria Kyriacou, President, ViacomCBS Networks UK, Australia and Israel; Google's Ben McOwen Wilson; and two high-profile BBC journalists, Amol Rajan and Kirsty



Warner Bros Discovery

Wark. YouTube EMEA regional boss Ben McOwen Wilson is stepping down after more than a decade leading the Google-owned platform across the region. He is departing YouTube but staying with Google, as he gets set

to lead the Google Play app store in EMEA.

The convention takes place on 27 September at Kings Place, London. Previously announced speakers include: BBC Director-General Tim Davie; Priya Dogra, President and MD, EMEA, Warner Bros Discovery; Channel 4 CEO Alex Mahon; ITV CEO Carolyn McCall; and Stephen van Rooyen, Executive Vice-President and CEO, UK and Europe, Sky.

The principal sponsor is Warner Bros Discovery.

For information and booking: rts.org.uk/event/rts-london-convention-2022

Matthew Bell

RTS
Yorkshire

Ahead of *Ackley Bridge*'s return to TV this summer, RTS Yorkshire brought together some of the show's young talent – old and new – to discuss Channel 4's popular school drama.

Laila Zaidi plays Asma Farooqi, a new teacher who, she explains, has been “suffocated by the pressures and the stress of living in London”, and has swapped law for teaching. “I've been there – it can be a daunting, overwhelming and a very expensive place to live,” added the Newcastle-raised actor.

Ackley Bridge, she notes approvingly, “shows two communities – you've got the traditional Muslim Pakistani community and the white working class, and it shows how they come together through the conduit of school.

“It tells real working-class stories and struggles, with authenticity, honesty and always with warmth, love and humour.”

Producer Jade Taylor said: “It's been an absolute joy to work on *Ackley Bridge*... We have the opportunity to... tell stories that we feel really passionate about and are pertinent to the world today, and that resonate with the working-class communities of the North and with schools.”

Ackley Bridge, which made its TV debut in 2017, is made by leading indie The Forge in and around Halifax. “I'm from



Laila Zaidi in *Ackley Bridge*

Channel 4

School's in for summer

Yorkshire and I think it's really important to represent the North and to tell those storylines that don't always get the spotlight,” said Taylor. “It's important that they're told by the communities from which they're grown. And it's beautiful and looks great on telly – the moor scenes, of which we've got quite a few in this series, look fantastic.”

Top Boy actor Ashley Walters is another new face – but behind the camera, sharing directing duties on series 5 with Reza Moradi.

Walters directed the short film *Boys* a couple of years ago, but *Ackley Bridge* is his first major TV directing gig.

Yasmin Al-Khudhairi, who plays firebrand Fizza, said: “The naturalism that [Ashley] has in acting he definitely brings to directing as well... He has a very funny, chilled-out presence... [He] puts everyone at ease.”

Megan Morgan, who took over the role of school beauty Marina for the new series, added: “He gave us more time for emotional scenes,

which is needed when filming is so fast-paced.”

Turning to what she hoped viewers would take from a series known for tackling difficult subjects, Zaidi said: “It's OK not to be OK... and [say] I need help, whether that's addiction, mental health or whatever.”

Writer Kamal Kaan chaired the RTS Yorkshire event, which was held on 7 July. It was introduced by Caroline Hollick, head of drama at Channel 4.

Matthew Bell

Bristol hosts Albert green training

RTS
West of England

RTS West of England offered a free editorial training workshop, given by Bafta's Albert scheme, at the new BBC Studios building in Bristol in early July.

It highlighted ways to create content that supports

an environmentally sustainable society.

Albert sustainability trainer and consultant Frankie Singler started proceedings with an overview of Albert and set the context of challenges raised by climate change. He then delved into “Planet

placement”, an Albert campaign that provides practical guidance on how to incorporate climate change issues and sustainability into programme-making.

Singler shared case studies and encouraged discussion, with a view to

achieving more and better climate storytelling across all genres.

The session ended with pledges on how participants would incorporate sustainable principles into their home and work life.

Suzy Lambert

BOOK REVIEW

Earlier this year, a joint bid from two Northern Ireland indies – Tern TV Belfast and Green Inc – won the tender to produce 24 episodes a year of *Sunday Morning Live*, BBC One’s ethical and religious current affairs show.

The show is broadcast live from a London studio, using producers and directors in Glasgow, Manchester and Sheffield, but is produced and edited in Hollywood, Northern Ireland. It sounds complicated but it works, as a recent joint RTS London/ Yorkshire event discovered.

Sunday Morning Live’s executive producers – head of Tern TV Belfast Brendan Hughes and Green Inc founder Stephen Stewart – are old colleagues from the BBC. “We’ve always wanted to find something to work together on... this one came along and it looked like it was a great mix of our complementary skills,” said Stewart.

Tern has made many religious programmes, including *Songs of Praise*, while Green Inc has a track record in live studio shows. “It felt like the right thing to do together,” said Hughes. “I wanted to get back into live television again... there’s nothing more exciting.”

The indies won a two-year contract to make the show, following a keenly fought tender process. “We bring a different perspective to the show,” said Hughes. “We’re right on the very edge of the UK and it feels like we look in rather than look out... We’re looking at the entire nation.”

Nevertheless, the two indies decided to shoot at ITN in London. “A lot of the guests are based in London and [with] a Sunday-morning show, if we make [it] somewhere else, be it Glasgow or Belfast, you’d be asking guests to fly there on a Saturday, including the presenters, and they’re key... [You’d be] tying people up for their weekend,”



BBC

Finding my religion

RTS London/ Yorkshire BBC One ethics show *Sunday Morning Live* is a truly UK-wide affair, discovers **Matthew Bell**

explained Stewart.

Guests who can’t get to London join the show via Zoom, which Stewart said is now accepted TV practice.

Sunday Morning Live addresses topical issues but, said Hughes, “We’ll not take a political view on a subject – we take an ethical view.”

Series editor Neil Dimmock continued:

“We come off the back of two heavily political shows... viewers won’t want us to be having the same conversations they’ve heard all morning, but these are clearly important subjects.”

Sunday Morning Live has its own distinctive take on stories. In the wake of Boris Johnson’s resignation, the show hosted a discussion about leadership, asking

whether moral integrity was a key ingredient. Dimmock said: “We’re not avoiding the big talking points but we’re finding [their] ethical, moral or religious angles.”

Are any subjects taboo? “We wouldn’t rule anything out,” said Dimmock. “It’s the way that you approach it rather than the subject itself that is key.”

Hughes added: “We try to avoid overly political voices... We’re looking for a voice that hasn’t been heard in the debate... We like to come at it from a different angle.”

The show is planned in Hollywood during the week, before key crew such as Dimmock and producer Kathy Littler fly to London on Saturday to write the script,

brief presenters and film the show. “It’s topical and live, and things change,” said Hughes. “This means that, until it’s over, you’re juggling things.”

“There really is nothing like the buzz of live TV,” said Littler. “It’s not for everyone... you have to have a certain amount of bravery and know-how to be reactive and problem solve very quickly.”

Hughes added: “Stephen and I, independently of each other, years back, made decisions that we would never work with people we didn’t like. We hire people we like and can have a lot of fun with – that’s important in telly. If you can’t enjoy yourself, what are you doing?” ■

‘Sunday Morning Live: Production focus’ was a joint RTS London and RTS Yorkshire event, held online on 21 July. It was chaired by Fiona Thompson and produced by Phil Barnes.

‘THERE IS NOTHING LIKE THE BUZZ OF LIVE TV’

This important book has been more than 10 years in the making and, by a fortunate chance, it has been published in the BBC's centenary³⁶ year, just a few years ahead of the centenary of television itself.

As Professor Medhurst points out, the history of television is an enormous subject. Its early days can be summarised by man of letters Samuel Johnson's quotation about a dog walking on its hind legs: "It is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all."

Public interest was immense. It was fed by optimistic articles by Oliver Hutchinson, the general manager of John Logie Baird's small and undercapitalised company, which was, at first, called Television Ltd.

Publicity also came through Sydney Moseley, an able but argumentative journalist who was critical of the BBC's hesitancy.

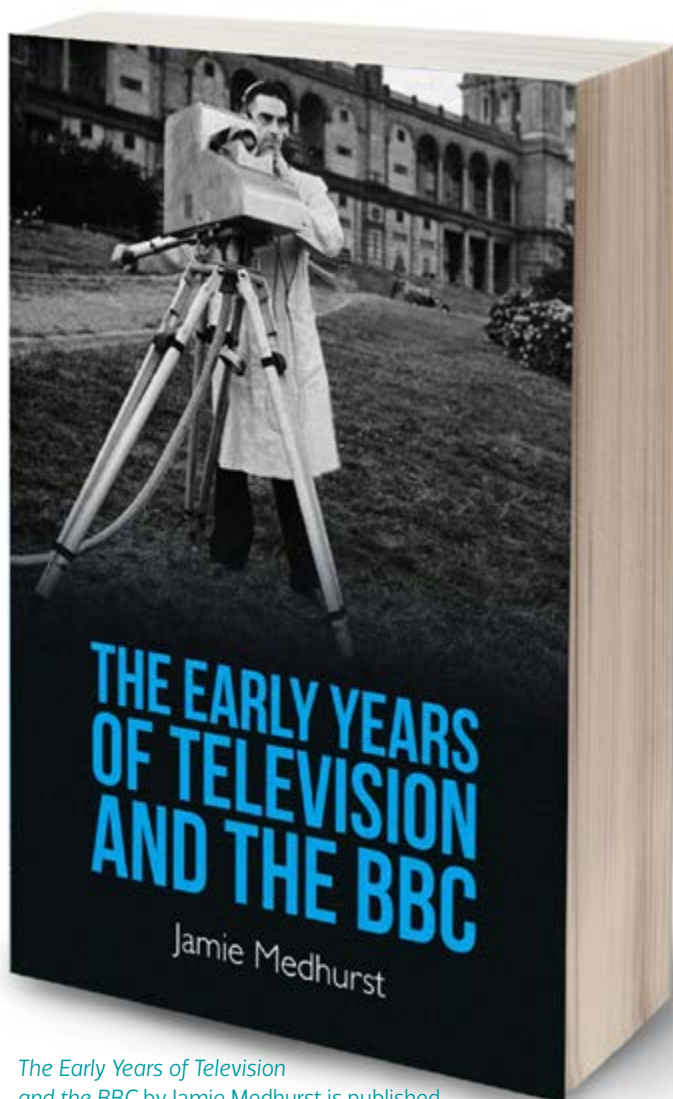
Baird himself spent most of his time in the laboratory, as is evident from his steady output of patents for improvements and new forms of television.

Public broadcasting in Britain was only legally possible through the BBC, which had been founded in 1922 and received its Charter in 1927.

The BBC was at first very cautious towards television, and its Director-General, John Reith, confessed in later life that he had been "afraid of [television] from the start".

But, eventually, the BBC was converted and in 1929 it agreed to broadcast experimental television (using 30 lines) on one of its radio wavelengths, outside regular broadcasting hours.

This gradual winning over of the BBC is the main theme of this book, which covers the period between 1926 and the outbreak of the Second



The Early Years of Television and the BBC by Jamie Medhurst is published by Edinburgh University Press, priced £85.00. ISBN: 9780748637867

How the BBC embraced TV

Book Review Malcolm Baird praises a history of the broadcaster's formative years

World War in 1939. It is lucidly written and surprisingly short at 208 pages. However, the book includes 585 endnotes and 10 pages of bibliography.

Much of its material comes

from the archives of the BBC and various parliamentary committees. However, the coverage of Baird Television is less detailed. For example, the company's takeover by Gaumont British Pictures in

1932 is only mentioned in passing, although the influx of capital led to a major expansion.

Prior to the Gaumont takeover, Baird Television employed about 30 staff. But when, in 1933, it opened new laboratories at the Crystal Palace, it added 300 technical staff.

In 1934, a fully equipped high-definition television studio was set up, but sadly this was lost in the Crystal Palace fire of November 1936.

Despite the above criticism, I recommend Professor Medhurst's book to the serious researcher on the history of broadcasting.

As he points out, his book is more focused on media politics than the technology of television itself.

In fact, new technology is still driving changes that are not always foreseen by the administrators. The book's hidden message is that the gap between technical and administrative thinking in the television industry has been wider than it should be.

One quick postscript. Professor Medhurst goes into much detail about Lance Sieveking's production of *The Man with the Flower in his Mouth*. This puts me in mind of Sieveking's 1935 novel, *The Perfect Witch – Love Story of Fabian Cloudesley, Announcer*.

It gives us a picture of what it was like to work for the BBC in the 1930s and it also contains a vivid description of the Baird 30-line "flying spot" camera in the basement studio at Broadcasting House.

Perhaps it is not too late for the BBC to support the reissue of this novel, which is a good read as well as having historical value. ■

Malcolm Baird is a retired university professor and the son of John Logie Baird, the inventor of the first working television.

The UPSIDE

Leicester Square to Dragon and Castle

In a month of heatwaves, drought, torrential storms and soaring inflation, Sky brought some much-needed relief for a few hours in mid-August. Hollywood-style movie glitz lit up London's Leicester Square for the premiere of the *Game of Thrones* prequel, *House of the Dragon*.

Not one, but two, full-size cinemas – the Odeon Luxe and Cineworld – screened the first episode of the HBO and Sky Atlantic fantasy epic.

Matt Smith and Emma D'Arcy were among the stars gracing the red carpet emerging from a castle erected in the middle of Leicester

Square. London's West End had seen nothing like it since before the pandemic struck.

Paxo signs up for more witty disdain

From dragons to another of TV's most dangerous beasts – the impeccably grumpy Jeremy Paxman, who is standing down as *University Challenge's* master of ceremonies.

Thankfully, the erstwhile *Newsnight* attack dog will record one more series of the box's brainiest quiz show, which began on ITV 60 years ago with Bamber Gacoigne asking the questions and is now a ratings banker for BBC Two.

For more than 1,000 episodes, Paxman's look of withering disdain for undergraduates struggling to answer the easier questions has been compared to that of a disgusted thoroughbred horse. The Upside couldn't

possibly comment – and looks forward to seeing him in other TV roles soon, including an ITV documentary detailing his experience of Parkinson's disease.

Google taps YouTube topper for Play

Congratulations to YouTube executive Ben McOwen Wilson, who is being promoted within the Google empire. He is standing down, after more than 11 years, as regional director for YouTube EMEA and MD of YouTube UK and Ireland to lead the fast-growing Google Play app store in EMEA. Ben's presence has brought a calm authority to many an RTS event, not least as Chair of last year's Cambridge Convention.

"YouTube EMEA is so burnt into my soul, and I suspect I have left my mark with YouTube also," he said of his departure. Too true.

A welcoming door for disabled writers

Finally, everyone knows that we need to hear more disabled voices in TV drama. Shows such as Jack Thorne's recent rollicking *Then Barbara Met Alan* are all too rare.

A new ITV Studios scheme aims to address the problem.

The Disabled Writers in Development Programme intends to prepare disabled writers to be commissioned by ITV and the wider industry.

Funded by ITV's £500,000 Diversity Development Fund, the scheme will run for a year, and four writers will be given the means to develop an ITV-focused idea and write a pilot script.

It is supported by Patrick Spence's scripted studio and Tall Story Pictures.

Applications are open to disabled people only. Those applying must have at least one paid writing credit in TV, theatre, short film or radio. ■



The Steve Hewlett Memorial Lecture 2022

5 September

6.00pm for a 6.30pm start

University of Westminster,
4-12 Little Titchfield Street, London W1W 7BY

Booking: www.rts.org.uk.

Tickets £20.00 / Student discounted tickets £10



'The BBC – Destroy at your peril'

Given by journalist and broadcaster

Clive Myrie

There will be a reception after the lecture in the Portland Hall. Proceeds of the lecture will go to the Steve Hewlett Scholarship Fund, which is chaired by Sir Clive Jones, and managed by him, Steve's widow, Rachel Crellin, and John Mair.



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