

September 2020

Television



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From the CEO



Our summer may have been highly unusual, but I am proud to say that RTS events came thick and fast from head office and our centres across the UK.

This issue reports some outstanding sessions: "In conversation with James Purnell", the BBC's director of radio and education, expertly chaired by Miranda Sawyer; a discussion of *The Salisbury Poisonings* from RTS Futures Northern Ireland; and a fascinating look at the importance of TV brands in a cluttered digital landscape.

Diversity and inclusion remain top of our sector's agenda, and were

epitomised by David Olusoga's MacTaggart Lecture at the Edinburgh International Television Festival, a sobering account of his experience of racism while working in television. Our TV Diarist, Pat Younge, recalls an alienating episode of his own during the early part of his career. He also praises a new generation of black activists demanding lasting change.

Also inside, Channel 4's Maria St Louis looks at social justice from an advertising perspective, while Ofcom's Vikki Cook responds to Marcus Ryder's piece in our last issue.

Autumn is traditionally the time when viewing figures surge as the nights draw in. I, for one, am looking

forward to ITV's *The Singapore Grip*, adapted by the great Christopher Hampton. Caroline Frost discovers what it was like to make the series.

We also hear from Sky Arts head Phil Edgar-Jones about his plans for the channel, which goes free-to-air later this month.

With production recovering, there is a growing sense that TV is getting back on the front foot after lockdown. Massive credit to the ingenuity of our industry for making this happen.

Theresa

Theresa Wise

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Cover: *The Singapore Grip* (ITV)

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Thursday 15 October	10:00-10:45am	Post-production: is this where the magic of TV really happens?
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TV diary

David Olusoga's powerful MacTaggart lecture contained uncomfortable personal echoes for **Pat Younge**



It's been an unusually domestic and turbulent month. Covid-19 wiped out the idea of piggy-backing on my wife's work trip to Tokyo, the family holiday in Greece and travelling to Edinburgh for the TV festival.

But it's not been quiet, as the reverberations of the death in May of George Floyd, under the knee of an American cop, are still being felt in August.

It triggered an interest in race and race relations that we've probably not seen here since the New Cross fire and Brixton riots in 1981. And, after a lot of soul searching in the TV industry, the commitments have come thick and fast.

I'm old enough to have been here before, many times, so it was great to see a new generation of activists on the scene taking up the battle, such as Adeel Amini and the BAME TV Task Force. Let's hope they will find the allies to get this done.

■ In May, along with Narinder Minhas, I left Sugar Films to launch Cardiff Productions. Early August saw the transmission of our first show, *The Talk*, a co-production with Whisper, which also part-funded the show.

It went from a casual conversation with Fatima Salaria at Channel 4 to broadcast in just six weeks.

Despite Covid-19 and the tight turnaround, all the talent in the senior roles was black, including camera, sound and editing. I guess it shows that where there's a will...

■ We have a series in production, *Am Drol*, for S4C, showcasing the beauty and characters of the Welsh countryside. However, because of Covid guidelines, we've had to review and rework everything from minibuses to toilets to packed lunches. It's been an interesting creative and logistical challenge. So far, so good.

I just wish we could rework the bloody weather.

■ I thought this month would be a good time to start to learn the Welsh language. I studied in Cardiff for five years, support Welsh rugby and can sing the national anthem – but never learnt the language. Given our long-term commitment to Cardiff, and working closely with Welsh-language producers and S4C and BBC Cymru/Wales, it seems like the right thing to do.

I took advice from Adrian Chiles, who'd been learning the language for an S4C show, and have subscribed to a tuition service. Come back to me next August to find out how I'm doing.

■ If it's August, it must be the MacTaggart lecture, kicking off the Edinburgh International Television Festival. This year it was digital and delivered by David Olusoga. Wow! What a speech he delivered, not just deeply personal but also with some policy prescriptions that invited Ofcom to regulate diversity or step aside for someone who will.

A lot of my black and brown colleagues on social media used the same phrase: "Now I feel seen." I understood what they were talking

about, because David tackled head-on that hoary old race/class question and the pernicious ways race and class biases push you to the industry's edges and often out of the door.

It happened to me, when I was a local news correspondent at *BBC Newsroom South East*. It was 1994 and I was taken aside by my boss and told that, "while your accent sounds just like most people in this region, it's not RP and we have a lot of BBC senior execs who watch our show". The solution was to enrol me, aged 30, in elocution lessons.

One night, it took me three hours to record a 40-second voice piece. It was confidence-sapping and soul-destroying. Luckily, I had producing experience from LWT and managed to get into an off-screen role and restart my career. Many didn't have the opportunity of a second chance.

■ The month ended with our second broadcast, again for Channel 4, *Peter: The Human Cyborg*. If you wanted a film that showed you how technology could be a hedge against the worst impacts of extreme disability, and how the power of a positive mindset and unquestioning, devoted love could possibly conquer all, this is the film for you.

It is also a fitting tribute to the director, Matt Pelly, who died following a fatal fall during a filming hiatus, but who set the style and tone of the film. This one was for him.

Pat Younge, former chief creative officer of BBC Vision Productions, is Managing Director of Cardiff Productions.

Take five...

Kate Holman and Imani Cottrell update us on five social media trends

TikTok screen wipes

TikTok has allowed any of us to become social media famous, with the app showcasing new talent surfacing from viral trends that anyone can participate in.

One of the most popular trends is the **#WipeItDown** challenge, which shows users as their normal selves in a mirror before wiping the mirror down to reveal a surprising alternative image.

Stars such as Jason Derulo and Will Smith have had fun with the trend. The videos are set to the song *Wipe It Down* by BMW Kenny and Theelboy.

Depop dramas

Who could have known there would be so much drama on social shopping app Depop? The weird and wonderful world of Depop has been catapulted to the mainstream after an app user set up an Instagram account that showcases the best of **#DepopDrama**.

From outlandish excuses as to why an order was not shipped ("I fell off the edge of a swimming pool and got concussion"), to someone accidentally paying £12,000 instead of £12 for a second-hand top, the comments never fail to shock and amuse.



#2020Challenge

Social media is the place to go if you want to find a great meme to make light of a difficult situation. And the pandemic has provided more than

enough content to help us all survive the socially distanced months. The one currently doing the rounds is the **#2020Challenge**. Started by Reese Witherspoon, the meme shows the months of the year so far represented by different characters. Witherspoon pulls a range of hilarious facial expressions that become increasingly dramatic as the year goes on.

Since Witherspoon posted the meme on Instagram, influencers, celebrities and even brands have recreated the **#2020Challenge** to show



their own versions of 2020, from Kerry Washington to Netflix. Our favourites are the depictions of the ever-shocking *Killing Eve* and the emotional rollercoaster *Normal People*.

Bread heads

When the UK went into lockdown in March, the nation saw a bigger rise in amateur baking than when a new series of *Bake Off* hits our screens. With self-raising flour like gold dust, people found solace in their Instagrammable sourdough creations.

Soon, everyone wanted a slice, and no social media platform was free from the hourly updates of Instagrammers "feeding" their starters.

Once the reality of spending days, even weeks, creating one small loaf set in, people turned their attention to banana bread. Less work than the demanding sourdough, but with more failed attempts than successes, the banana bread phase was short-lived.

The latest bread trend spreading across the social platforms is cloud bread. Soaring in popularity due to its fluffy, colourful appearance and skimpy recipe (a mere three ingredients), **#CloudBread** has accumulated 2.5 billion views on TikTok and nearly 36,000 posts on Instagram.

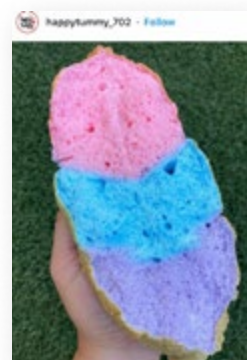
All you need is egg whites, sugar and cornflour – mixed in with some food colouring to create your own rainbow creations.

Fitness freaks

Since lockdown, gyms may be empty but that hasn't stopped people from turning to social media to "feel the burn" with home workouts.

Workout queen Chloe Ting has more than 2.7 million followers on Instagram and 14 million subscribers on YouTube. She has been spearheading some major fitness transformations, uniting people with the hashtag **#ChloeTingChallenge**. The hashtag involves a daily 20-minute workout to sculpt a toned and athletic physique.

Ting is not the only one getting people moving: fitness guru Kayla Itsines is the personal trainer behind the popular **#BBG**, which stands for the Bikini Body Guide, and has garnered a legion of fans who credit the workout regime with helping them to stay fit and healthy. ■



OUR FRIEND IN THE NORTH EAST

Graeme Thompson
asks if the infamous
'exams algorithm'
also informed the
BBC's plan to axe
regional services



University of Sunderland

It was Groundhog Day for me when news broke that the BBC was proposing to cut £25m from the BBC England budget by 2022. Flashback to redundancies across regional programme teams, the culling of popular titles and complaints from audiences seeing and hearing less about where they live.

I was regional director of ITV Tyne Tees & Border when, in 2008, Michael Grade announced £35m of cuts to local news and programmes. Popular titles such as *The Dales Diary*, *Grundy's Wonders* and *The Way We Were* vanished alongside production teams who also made shows for the network.

No amount of protests and talk of ratings success in the regional slots (up against the mighty *EastEnders*) were ever going to change ITV's determination to replace local favourites with cheaper products. And, from Ofcom's perch overlooking the Thames, the commercial arguments all seemed perfectly reasonable.

Fast forward 12 years and the BBC is making the same case. The long-running *Inside Out* current-affairs series and its production teams – who also produce award-winning documentaries for the BBC network channels – are being axed.

In the case of the North East and Cumbria, *Inside Out* performed strongly against *Coronation Street* and ranked alongside ratings phenomenon *The Repair Shop* in audience appreciation scores.

Regional TV news and radio services are also in the line of fire. The axe is not as sharp in the BBC nations. Quite rightly, home-grown production in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland is more protected. If only it were the same for the English regions.

Northern Ireland, with a population smaller in size than the 3 million

people living in the North East and Cumbria, has a BBC TV budget of £29m – that's £15 of TV spend for every viewer. In my English region, the equivalent spend is £1.87.

One of the BBC's justifications for the cuts is its desire to focus on "underserved" audiences. I think you could safely argue that a publicly funded broadcaster already commissioning little content from a region whose population is bigger than Northern Ireland's and about the same as Wales is, indeed, significantly underserved.

It feels like a rationale utilising the same algorithm that levelled down A-level results for comprehensives but boosted schools teaching Latin.

In its defence, the BBC's senior managers argue that the English regions need to take a share of the target savings (£125m). Furthermore, *Inside Out* is being replaced with a

new current-affairs strand serving six super-regions led by a commissioning team based in Birmingham.

The 11 existing production teams will be replaced by six slimmed-down hubs, where journalists will make way for content producers. The new Yorkshire and North West replacement in 2021 will have an audience stretching from Haverigg in the west to beyond Holbeach in the east.

In mileage, that's the equivalent of a region spanning Newcastle to London. In my experience, viewers like network and they value local, but other people's local programming is a hard sell.

Since the 1990s, the UK has increasingly slashed investment in local economies to power that of its capital. I remember visiting newsrooms in the US during that period and being told that TV audiences wouldn't put up with a network that spent more time on Washington news than local activity. Not true of England, apparently.

At a time when democracy is under threat as a result of widespread cuts in commercial radio bulletins and newspapers, the BBC appears intent on further alienating loyal audiences outside London by reducing opportunities for them to see and hear their lives and localities reflected online and on-screen.

So, fewer jobs and fewer opportunities for the next generation of programme-makers. At least the cuts don't extend to the regional politics slot. These may not be award-winning programmes, but they're highly valued by local MPs, whose opposition to the downsizing might just be appeased. Ofcom, on the other hand, may prove more difficult to convince. ■

Graeme Thompson is pro vice-chancellor for external relations at the University of Sunderland and Chair of the RTS Education Committee.

WORKING LIVES



Military advisor

From staging the Battle of Waterloo for the ITV adaptation of *Vanity Fair* to recreating trench warfare for the Oscar-winning *1917*, Paul Biddiss ensures that battle scenes in TV and film are as authentic as possible.

What does the job involve?

My job is to support the director and make films realistic from a military perspective. On Sam Mendes' First World War movie *1917*, I was running up and down the trenches with 500 men, checking they were holding their weapons and equipment the right way.

When do you start work on a show?

Ideally, I'm brought on to a production as early as possible. On the Sky 1

action series *Strike Back*, I was actually in the writers room, helping to make the stories authentic.

When I have the script, I advise the costumes and props departments on military uniforms and equipment. Then, I train the cast and supporting artists in how, for example, to use weapons realistically and safely.

How did you become a military advisor?

It wasn't planned. I served 24 years as a paratrooper in the British Army, stationed around the world. After leaving the army, I worked as a private investigator and a bodyguard.

I had a lean period before answering an ad for a job as an extra on the 2014 Second World War movie *The Monuments Men*. The military advisor was with the main film unit, so I made a

suggestion for a scene. I didn't know that extras on set were meant to be seen, not heard. The director, George Clooney, liked my idea.

Word got around and I got called in to run the extras' boot camps for *Fury*, starring Brad Pitt as a Second World War tank commander. It all took off from there.

What was your first TV work?

BBC One's 2016 adaptation of *War & Peace* was my first big TV project as a military advisor. I wanted to show guys knocking seven bells out of each other, because that's what the battlefield was like back then when you got to close quarters.

There were 500 Lithuanian extras. I had three days' notice to study Napoleonic warfare. Then, I had to carry out



1917

Entertainment One

a risk assessment, put a boot camp together and train them for the shoot.

Do you have to have been in the army to work as an advisor?

Yes – you have to have experienced military life. You have to be able to articulate to an actor the thoughts and feelings of a soldier as he potentially faces his death. It's about much more than knowing how a rifle works.

Can real soldiers play TV armies?

It's not always a good idea – sometimes, you need a blank canvas. Trained, modern-day soldiers would march perfectly in step but during, say, the Battle of Waterloo, many soldiers were not that polished, so it wouldn't be realistic.

Can you advise on all types of warfare?

All through history and beyond – I do sci-fi, too. For a new series, I've developed a system incorporating Roman, Napoleonic and modern-day drills.

What do you bring to work with you?

My experience. I drill actors until it's natural, so they can concentrate on their acting.

Do military advisors always get it right?

You never get everything 100% correct

– the Russian soldiers' green tunics in *War & Peace* were not always right as the shade changed three times between the periods depicted.

But a production isn't going to pay for 500 uniforms three times over just to appease the purists.

On *1917*, Sam Mendes said he was making the film for an audience of millions, not to satisfy a few nitpickers. Military advisors are helping to make an entertainment, not a documentary.

What work are you most proud of?

I'm hugely proud of *1917*. It was a hard job due to the nature of the shoot, which used a series of long takes – if one of the extras had screwed up during a nine-minute take and we had to do it again, everyone would have been looking at me.

What are the best and worst parts of the job?

The best is when I see the people I've trained on screen, getting everything on point and doing it effortlessly. I use a three-bar system of excellence to encourage the actors: "good"; "the dog's bollocks"; and "airborne", the highest.

The worst is when a production brings you on board to train a cast, but

hasn't got the money to keep you on set. It's so frustrating when they get the details wrong during filming because there's no military advisor on hand.

Sometimes, productions don't understand the value an advisor brings – we can save them money by helping them to avoid reshoots.

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

Keep yourself fit – if you're training an actor and you want them to take you seriously, you have to be able to do exactly the same things that you're asking them to do.

What TV series or film would you love to work on?

I'd love to do a series set in Roman times – that's an interesting period. And *Star Wars* – the storm troopers need sorting out!

Is it a great life as a military advisor?

My ex-army mates think I'm a lucky bugger to get myself into film and TV. It's even worse when I tell them it all kicked off after a chance encounter with George Clooney. ■

Military advisor Paul Biddiss was interviewed by Matthew Bell.

COMFORT CLASSIC



Amazon

Gilmore Girls

A gentle guide to getting older and wiser, which **Moya Lothian-McLean** returns to again and again

On the face of it, a coming-of-age story about a mother and daughter who live in a quirky Connecticut town and speak at the pace of an Aaron Sorkin script doesn't sound that comforting. But that would be to judge *Gilmore Girls*, the cult comedy-drama created by Amy Sherman-Palladino too quickly.

Hitting screens in 2000, the show ran for seven seasons, its cross-generational popularity such that it was revived for a four-part Netflix mini-series in 2016, nearly 10 years after the last episode aired.

There's no secret about why the show is so beloved; sinking into the world of *Gilmore Girls* is like sipping on your first hot chocolate of autumn or swaddling yourself in a thick duffle coat.

At the centre of its appeal are Lorelei and Rory Gilmore, a mother and daughter navigating the world. When we meet them, both have a lot of growing up to do; Lorelei is a formerly teen mother who has a fraught relationship with her wealthy, old-money parents. Rory is literally a teenager. Often, their relationship is more like siblings than parent and child.

Which is part of what makes *Gilmore*

Girls so magic; both Lorelei and Rory are fully fleshed out women characters. This shouldn't be rare but, all too often, it is. These two are more than the sum of their parts, not just "a mother" or "a daughter". They have individual hopes, dreams, loves and losses.

At times, each makes mistakes or does horribly unlikeable things. Sherman-Pallino wasn't afraid to allow the women she wrote to be real and learn the lessons of life the hard way. It makes *Gilmore Girls* both a refreshing show but also a comforting one. Life is messy, the show says. And that's OK.

However, some of the joy also lies in the fact it stops short of full reality. The *Gilmore Girls* exist in a golden bubble: despite family tensions, there's always a large pot of money on hand if needed to bail them out.

Lorelei and Rory live in Stars Hollow, an unbelievable little town, stuffed with zany characters, who make up a tight-knit community that's simply too good to be true. Viewers will also notice the dark side of this; a huge lack of non-white faces. It's not the show for you if you're watching for proper representation in 2020.

Frankly though, as a woman of colour, I'm not. Time and time again, I return to *Gilmore Girls* because of its pseudo-reality, its slow-burn soap opera, its gentle guide to getting older and wiser.

It's a programme from another era, before everything was on-demand and you could binge an entire season in a day. The plots reflect that: arcs that last several seasons, calm pacing (despite the fast talking) that allows the viewer to sit with the storylines and fall in love with the world that is being carefully created in front of their eyes.

Gilmore Girls is smart and savvy but also a cocoon of safety, one that, at its warm heart, shares a spirit with the likes of *Anne of Green Gables* or *Little House on the Prairie*. It's a story of community and mutual support. That's the quality that renders it timeless and why, when I'm in need of a bit of light and optimism, I'll always head to Stars Hollow. ■

***Gilmore Girls* is on Netflix and Amazon.**

Ear candy



To provide succour to desperate *Succession* fans faced with a long wait for series 3, HBO has assembled the cast for a sequence of longform, one-on-one

interviews. Loosely inspired, it is said, by the Murdochs, the Roy family of *Succession* boasts some of the most complex characters on the small screen. Series 2 saw the Roy siblings vying to ascend the Waystar Royco throne once the aging, raging patriarch Logan Roy (Brian Cox) finally steps down.

Sports journalist Roger Bennett hosts with infectious enthusiasm. His emphatic introductions to each actor have become something of a trademark. He breezily steers the conversation from their origins to the peaks and valleys of

their *Succession* characters' story arcs.

As the Roys are all in severe need of therapy, there is ample material for psychoanalysis. And Bennett does his best to unearth the roots of the relentless conflict and abuse by digging deep into their past traumas. No stone is left unturned, no trait unanalysed and no wardrobe uninspected.

Each actor's devotion to the craft shines through, but none more so than Jeremy Strong, who plays Kendall Roy. He confesses to taking method acting to mentally detrimental extremes.

Sprinkled and bookended with memorable quotes from the character in question, HBO's *Succession Podcast* will enlighten and leave you laughing. "If it is to be said," as a wise Greg once said, "so it is."

Harry Bennett

ITV's adaptation of JG Farrell's novel *The Singapore Grip* has many contemporary resonances, discovers **Caroline Frost**



An epic story of imperial hubris

It's a false sense of entitlement that we have to get rid of, because it can have catastrophic results. This is a story that recommends modesty. I think arrogance was the main problem and it's big a problem today in the way things have been handled recently in this country."

Screenwriter Christopher Hampton, who has adapted *The Singapore Grip* for the small screen, clearly sees recent parallels to the tale told in JG Farrell's last novel.

His epic treatment of Farrell's 700-plus pages comes to ITV this month and tells the story of what Winston Churchill called "the largest capitulation" in British history – the fall of Singapore in 1942. The book was the third in Farrell's "Empire" trilogy, his

exploration of the consequences of colonialism.

Japan's victory at Singapore was overshadowed globally by the events of Pearl Harbor just two months previously, but it was, nevertheless, calamitous for the British Empire: it led to the capture of nearly 80,000 Allied soldiers, the death of thousands more, and an evacuation on a massive scale.

Hampton's own uncle was among the desperate throng who boarded ships and fled the island just before the invasion. The screenwriter (an Oscar winner for *Dangerous Liaisons*) therefore felt a personal connection to the story.

He had also known and admired JG Farrell when they both lived in London's Notting Hill during the 1970s. Tragically, Farrell drowned off the coast of Ireland in 1979.

Hampton was determined to keep the comic, often bemused, tone of the author's prose in his screenplay, highlighting the military incompetence, casually racist society and all-round complacency that led to Britain's downfall in the region.

"He treats a serious subject with wit and lightness, which gradually darkens as the story darkens," explains Hampton. "I wanted to preserve the comedy where I could, and it's very amusing in places. I also wanted to keep the balance between the real-life military characters and the family saga, giving them context."

Hampton, who also served as an executive producer on the project, sounds almost embarrassed when he adds: "I found the whole process of adapting the book immensely

enjoyable. Nobody should be paid for having so much fun.”

He was blessed with a cast able to swing with these nuances of light and shade. David Morrissey plays Walter Blackett, a complacent rubber-company executive focused only on what works best for him. Charles Dance is his more principled colleague, Old Mr Webb, and Luke Treadaway his equally well-intentioned but wet-behind-the-ears son, Matthew.

Jane Horrocks and Georgia Blizard play Blackett’s wife and daughter, while *Coronation Street* alumna Eliza-beth Tan is the mysterious and disruptive Vera Chiang.

Treadaway clearly delighted in his role: Matthew Webb is a late arrival to

firmly where Matthew’s values are. In the scene where I’m asking Walter about how he treats his workers, I found myself getting angry with him, and everyone like him.”

While it is all too easy to see the complacency and arrogance of Farrell’s characters in many of our contemporary public figures, Treadaway is stumped when I ask for a real-life modern equivalent of the more earnest, honourable Matthew Webb.

Hampton believes the challenge lies in the character’s innocence. He explains: “I don’t think this is a very innocent age. I feel that part of the story is that of an innocent who, in the course of the story, gradually gets educated. I think that there are genuine

its very different inhabitant. “We can all identify with the beautiful, cool house the Blacketts have created,” she laughs. “It’s fashionable, cool, absolutely pristine, the perfect house for a modern European living in Asia.”

Mr Webb’s house is darker, pokier but more characterful. “He’s immersed himself in the country’s culture. He’s collected things that are quite unique. It’s a true reflection of his personality.”

Other locations that jump out on screen include: the “Blue House”, where a bizarre dinner party takes place in the second episode; “an old clan house that dates back centuries, with little bits of water, dark wood, so much history”; and the recreation of the Battle of Slim River, filmed in southern Malaysia – “lots of Japanese extras cycling over rocky ground on bicycles from the 1940s – it looked magical”.

Abushweshah still can’t decide which was more temperamental – one of their leading men, who happened to be a monkey with very strong facial expressions, or the weather. Certainly, the latter failed to behave on one of the most important and, no doubt, expensive, shooting days of the entire project.

“It was a circus day. We had hundreds of extras, special effects, groups of singers, a cannon to shoot someone from. We’d flown people in from Thailand. We had 10 hours to shoot, and it rained for seven and a half of them.

“There was a foot of water on the ground. What could we do? We couldn’t drink, so we went to a café across the road, ate loads of cake and waited. Finally, we got the shots, but it was maddening.”

Treadaway says acting in these huge street scenes was thrilling, “the nearest I’ll have to time travel”. He hopes the series will spark conversations about the past: “We look at it and say, what’s changed? It’s a fascinating prism to look into another world, and have our own world reflected back at us.”

Is there hope, too, amid all the hubris and eventual devastation? Hampton believes so: “It resides in the understanding that arises between the races and the open-mindedness that leads to that. That’s the big positive of the story, and in the young people who are open to what’s happening. They’re aware of the world in a way that the older generation have become too boiled in aspic to notice.” ■



Luke Treadaway (left) with the principal cast

the party, and it is he who takes the audience on his journey into the rich, complex world of Singapore, beginning six months before the invasion.

He soon becomes the subject of two rival women’s affections, but it is in his protestations against Walter Blackett’s machinations for his rubber company that Matthew emerges as the most generous-minded of the characters. Treadaway describes him as “progressive for his time” in his attitude to native workers’ rights and not wanting to strip the country of its assets without putting something back.

The actor says he saw his character as one who learnt as he went along. “He wasn’t putting his body on the line, he was just less shackled to the status quo.

“My ethics and values come down

idealists in the world, though, and he’s in that family.”

The challenge of creating an epic feel for “a Second World War film shot in the tropics of Southeast Asia” has made this the biggest professional project yet for producer Farah Abushweshah, who previously worked with the same company, Mammoth Screen, on *The ABC Murders*.

The series was shot entirely in Southeast Asia, with Kuala Lumpur doubling for wartime Singapore. The neighbouring houses owned by Walter Blackett and Mr Webb on screen are, in reality, a stone’s throw from one another in the highest part of the city, which remains surprisingly lush and green.

The producer was delighted with the different moods the design team were able to create, each interior reflecting

Shilpa Ganatra examines why BBC Three's *Famalam*, a huge hit on social media, is making big waves with its third series

When *Famalam* came to our screens in 2018, British television was ready and waiting for a high-profile comedic exploration of the contemporary black British experience. It tapped the same vein as Michaela Coel's *Chewing Gum* and the 1990s ensemble show *The Real McCoy* – and another hit sketch show was long overdue.

It was squarely on target on both counts. In the two years since then, the show has earned RTS and Bafta recognition for its driving force, Akemnji Ndifornyen (known as AK), and actor/writers Samson Kayo and Gbemisola Ikumelo. The show's clips are among the BBC's most-viewed social content.

"A large part of [it] was to appeal to black folk, and for us to have agency over our stories," says AK of its crossover success. "Because it has served us first and has now gone broader, we're thrilled."

With the cast completed by Vivienne Acheampong, John Macmillan, Tom Moutchi and Danielle Vitalis, the troupe continues the winning formula in the third series. AK believes it to be "the strongest yet". Certainly, it's found its stride: alongside familiar characters, such as the imposing gaggle of aunties and the Nigerian philanthropist Prince Alyusi, its 22-minute episodes are crammed with absurd situations pushed to their extreme and smart observations about life today.

The opening gambit is a *Narcos*-style skit in which two avocado cartels meet to do a dangerous deal; "You know we are going to have to test it," says one, chopping up a line of avocado to smear on toast and taking a rush-inducing bite.

The new series sees a change of the core cast, with Roxy Sternberg stepping out and Vitalis stepping in.

"All the cast are becoming harder to nail down, but Roxy had a massive job offer in the US and we couldn't make it work," explains Ben Caudell, an

executive producer of all three series. "So we've brought in Danielle, and she's brilliant. The change has widened up our comic angles and it's brought a freshness to it. It excites the writers and keeps us on our toes."

While the dominating type of comedy is irreverence, the smarts are in the density of ideas, the multilayered observations and unexpected left turns. "Life provided a wealth of inspiration to lampoon and satire," says AK.

It helps that, with a largely black British cast and crew, otherwise-sensitive topics that have bubbled to the foreground this past year are handled from a place of experience, rather than judgement.

A case in point is a musical number,

Interracial Couples Selling Stuff, performed by AK as if channelling Errol Brown from *Hot Chocolate*. The everyday lyrics against the sexiness of the song is funny in itself, but poking fun at ad companies' formulaic output notches up the comedy – even when the point is the same as that made by social media trolls. For AK, it's a case of "classic message and messenger", he says. "Two people can say the same thing, but, because one person has the licence to say it, it means different things."

That is a large part of its unique position in 2020's TV landscape, explains Shane Allen, controller of BBC comedy commissioning: "People in mainstream white culture walk on eggshells in



A sketch show defying gravity



Vivienne Acheampong in *Famalam*

BBC

certain areas, working out how they can keep pushing the boundaries, but it's more likely that the boundaries are going to be pushed by people who aren't the mainstream voice.

"If you have people from those backgrounds who own the joke, then that's what the line is. Culturally, it's really important that comedy still has a bite and is able to ruffle feathers. It keeps comedy relevant in an age when people are saying, 'It's all gone PC and they're trying to take away our comedy'. Actually, we're trying hard for that not to be the case."

Crucially, in this politically weighty age, the show isn't only about the black experience. Jokes are made about the affront involved in leaving a WhatsApp group and people who thwart conversations when there's a spoiler involved – in other words, ribbing every aspect of contemporary life.

"If something pops up as part of the zeitgeist, it's like a Hungry Hippo: you have to knock it down," says AK. "I apply the *Family Guy* model of laughs: that nothing and no one is sacrosanct. So, while my name is one of the blackest, most African names you can ever find and, when I cross my mother's threshold, I'm in Cameroon, the reality is that there are some aspects of life that we all encounter. Love, relationships, aliens – we'll cover it all."

The social media figures indicate

that this approach has proved popular: "Turf wars" has been viewed more than 30 million times, and "There is no white Jesus" stands at 27.5 million views, making these *Famalam* sketches among the BBC's most successful social media content. Which, as a blunt measure of success, matters.

"The overnights are not as relevant as they were even two or three years ago – now you're looking for social media impact, cultural impact, and a little bit of industry impact," says Allen. "Social media figures are one factor in a wide array of how you judge a show, but, because the BBC is trying to reach the young, underserved audience, it's an important one – this audience isn't lining up to watch a specific show in a specific time slot on a specific channel any more. There isn't that brand loyalty."

It helps greatly, of course, that short-form content viewed on social media fulfils the BBC's remit as much as traditional viewing. The format also aids its remit of seeking out emerging talent, a specific forte of sketch shows. Allen reels off TV royalty such as Lenny Henry, Meera Syal, and Rowan Atkinson, whose talent was nurtured in sketch shows *Three of a Kind*, *The Real McCoy* and *Not the Nine O'Clock News*, respectively.

"Sketch shows encourage mastering of the short form: creating a character, finding a concept and playing it out in

two to three minutes," he says. "I think that's a great training ground for writers to then go on and write longer-form pieces or rounded sitcoms. *Father Ted* creators Graham Linehan and Arthur Mathews wrote for *Alas Smith & Jones* and, in the US, Tina Fey went from *Saturday Night Live* to *30 Rock*."

Famalam is already proving successful in developing talent, with Sternberg's move to the US, and AK's Bafta Television Craft Award for Breakthrough Talent suggesting that "he's going to be a lot of people's boss soon", according to Allen. The BBC comedy chief also commissioned *Brain in Gear*, Ikumelo's comedy short, for a full sitcom to air on BBC Two.

The better news is that, even if the cast and crew outgrow the show, the *Famalam* series could keep running regardless. "It's not like writing a soap opera or a new series of *Line of Duty*, where you have to keep thinking of new stories," says Caudell. "Sketches are often about life and there's always going to be new aspects coming through, and new talent coming through, too."

AK agrees: "In a show where we've set a template for regeneration, anything's possible. And this country has no shortage of black talent, because that's what this show is about. This can be a great platform for the next generation of people. I can see this show continuing and having a long-lasting legacy." ■

Heart melting viewing



2019 Contestants
Ian 'H' Watkins (left)
and pro Matt Evers

ITV

It was a remarkable moment in British TV, when two men skated on to the ice to perform together in a prime-time show. Hearts melted across the nation, from the *Dancing on Ice* studio to millions watching at home.

The same-sex pairing of Ian Watkins – “H” – from *Steps* with pro skater Matt Evers was a new development for the flagship ITV show – and, as a member of the production team told an RTS Midlands online masterclass, judge John Barrowman wasn’t the only one in tears. Executive producer Clodagh O’Donoghue recalled: “It was such an iconic moment and there wasn’t a dry eye anywhere in the studio. I’ve never heard an audience reception like it, on

**The makers of the
ITV family favourite
Dancing on Ice have
broken taboos. Now
they’re preparing to
socially distance**

any show. I was so proud and delighted by the viewers’ reaction – we thought it might be more negative.

“I remember when I rang Matt and said, ‘H has approached us about doing this, what do you think? It’s a brave thing to do.’ He started crying on me, saying, ‘I can’t believe the network is

going to do this.’ It shouldn’t be a thing so I didn’t quite realise what a big deal it was.”

The RTS event host, Richie Anderson, part of the BBC’s *Radio 2 Breakfast Show* team and a reporter on its TV magazine *The One Show*, said: “As a gay man, I felt it was empowering and there was an element of acceptance. It was a beautiful moment.”

Dancing on Ice superfan Anderson was the perfect upbeat host for the entertaining masterclass, as he admitted to having “anorak knowledge” of his favourite TV show. He even confessed to wanting judges and Olympic champions Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean to be his TV mum and dad.

He’s not alone in his love for *Dancing*

on Ice, which has dazzled as a Sunday-night family favourite over 12 series. Originally titled *Stars on Thin Ice*, it began in 2006. So far, 154 contestants have put their skates on, from Joe Pasquale and Todd Carty to Kelly Holmes and Vanilla Ice. There have been 18 judges, including Louie Spence, Katarina Witt, Robin Cousins and the acerbic Jason Gardiner.

The show will look a little different when it returns in January. One solution to filming with social distancing is to have Perspex panels between the judges on the Ice Panel. But one advantage *Dancing on Ice* has in a pandemic is that it's filmed in an isolated studio, a mile along a runway on a disused RAF base in Hertfordshire.

O'Donoghue said: "We have to look at what works with cameras and lighting. Will there be a reflection off the Perspex at a certain angle? We have all these decisions to make."

"The cast start training in October and will go into a sort of isolation separately in order for them to come together and train. There will be a lot of testing for Covid and being 'clean' – a period where you're not going out to nightclubs and rubbing up against people."

"Our studio isolation works very well for Covid. It's just us, there aren't any other shows around. *Dancing on Ice* used to come from Elstree and Shepperton Studios, but they were booked up when the show relaunched in 2018, so we purpose-built a studio at RAF Bovingdon. It's big enough for two ice rinks, a rehearsal and main studio rink, and for all the crew, dressing rooms and parking."

The on-screen talent consists of 13 celebrities and 13 professional skaters, four judges, two presenters – Philip Schofield and Holly Willoughby – and a commentator.

Backstage, there is a crew of 250, including medics and physios, catering staff and a wardrobe department for all the colourful, sequined costumes. Then there are the more unusual jobs, skate sharpeners and a tanning team to make sure the sun-deprived contestants aren't the same shade as the ice.

It may be freezing in the studio – it's no wonder the audience are wrapped

up in coats – but it can get steamy on the ice. The show has led to three lasting relationships and a baby. Former England goalkeeper David Seaman and Frankie Poultney are married, as are *Coronation Street*'s Samia Ghadie and Sylvain Longchambon, who have a son.

The last series saw the engagement of footballer-turned-BBC-pundit Kevin Kilbane and skater Brianne Delcourt – who had previously dated soap-star contestants Danny Young, Sam Attwater and Matt Lapinskas.

"Maybe there'll be a romance this time, who knows?" said O'Donoghue. "I was delighted about Kevin and Bri-

Gemma Collins falling flat on her face on the ice in last year's show, which O'Donoghue said was initially a "heart-wrenching" moment.

"All of us honestly thought she was seriously injured. We felt sick. But she just got up and started waving and smiling at the audience. It was amazing."

O'Donoghue picked actor Ray Quinn as the show's best celebrity skater but said that she has a soft spot for the reigning champion, Joe Swash: "He was a real surprise. When we first met him he was falling over all the time. If you had asked me to bet on who would be in the final, I would

never have said Joe. And then to win it – and what a lovely bloke."

"If I could sign up anyone, Beyoncé would be incredible. She would come out of that tunnel looking amazing, and I bet she can skate because she can do anything, can't she?"

When asked for tips on getting into TV, creative producer Sita Patel said: "I applied for every traineeship and runner scheme. Hunt down those opportunities, because they are out there."

"Be enthusiastic, persistent and respectful about the show you're hoping to work on. Watch it! And don't say: 'The last series wasn't very good'. Quietly getting on with your job, staying late to clean up and helping out with photocopying is what a producer will notice more than the person chatting loudly in the bar."

O'Donoghue, the daughter of publicans, revealed that her big break came thanks to common sense and a jug of sangria: "I was on work experience with TV production company Initial. It had a late meeting one night and they asked me to buy some sangria from a tapas place down the road. I thought, 'That's crazy, to spend all that money.'"

"So I made a jug myself and brought it in. The boss, Malcolm Gerrie, thanked me and when I told him what I'd done, he said: 'You are going to go far.'"

Report by Roz Laws. The RTS Midlands 'Dancing on Ice Masterclass' was held on 29 July and hosted by Richie Anderson. The producers were Caren Davies and Megan Fellows.



Reigning *Dancing on Ice* champion Joe Swash

anne. We pair them up on the basis of their heights and personalities. When we first meet a celebrity – and that's always on the ice, whoever they are, to make sure they can get from A to B – we ask what sort of pro they'd like. Are you competitive, do you need a pro who will push you? Do you just want to have a laugh? Do you want a pro who is kind and nurturing?"

"We want people to have a good time. There's no point doing it unless you're going to enjoy it. It's full on but so rewarding. They often keep skating for fitness – you get a really firm bum on *Dancing on Ice*."

Inevitably, there are falls, which is secretly what viewers may be waiting for. Everyone remembers reality star



Sky Arts is about to debut as a free service. **Phil Edgar-Jones**, the man in charge, explains to Steve Clarke what new viewers can expect

Portrait Artist of the Year:
Painter Toby Michael and
sitter Wunmi Mosaku

Sky

Inspiration to all

For many of us, starved of enjoying a real performance in a theatre or a concert hall these past months, watching Sky Arts in lockdown was a revelation. Most of us knew about its flagship shows *Urban Myths* and *Portrait Artist of the Year*. We were less familiar with the service's sheer eclecticism, which encompasses everything from ballet to the blues and Bono.

"On some occasions, our audience figures increased by as much as 40%," says Phil Edgar-Jones, who runs the channel. "During lockdown, we found that, across the board, there was a real hunger for cultural content. It wasn't only Sky Arts that benefited from this."

A spin-off show, *Portrait Artist of the Week*, perhaps reflecting a desire by some people in lockdown to take up painting, was one notable success.

The programme, which will return in October, was first shown on Facebook Live before transferring to the channel. "What we took away from this was that there is a great sense of community that can be built around people's passion points," he observes.

Edgar-Jones will soon be responsible

for another milestone in Sky Arts' history when, on 17 September, Sky Arts stops being a subscription-only service and goes free-to-air.

The move is bound to increase the network's popularity. In some quarters, it is being interpreted as a direct challenge to the BBC. Several commentators have remarked on what they perceive as a diminishing number of regular arts slots available on BBC television. Even BBC Four has latterly pivoted away from the arts to the extent that presenters such as the brilliant Andrew Graham-Dixon are rarely seen on the channel.

Edgar-Jones, who joined Sky as head of entertainment in 2012, plays down any suggestion that having Sky Arts on Freeview is likely to lure viewers away from BBC TV's arts coverage.

"The BBC's arts content is fantastic. It's very different to ours. We think about how we can create work that has a Sky flavour to it. Participation is at the heart of that," he insists. "I don't see it as a zero-sum game. We're all in it together. I'd like to work with [the BBC], not against it. I'd love to partner with the BBC on projects...."

"We always ask ourselves: 'Can we

be distinctive and do something different to the BBC and Channel 4?' I can say to an artist, 'You can have the channel for as long as you like, we'll take out the ad breaks, it's yours, do what you like with it.'"

Why, then, is Sky Arts removing its pay wall? The channel's impressive on-demand programming, amounting to around 2,000 hours of cultural content, will remain exclusive to Sky subscribers. "We've been looking at it for a while, the best part of 2019. We did a lot of research around the channel and talked to people in the arts world, practitioners and leaders, to see what it was about the channel that was important to them."

Three conclusions were drawn from this process – the desire to make Sky Arts more widely accessible, the need to help drive diversity and inclusivity, and the aim of increasing participation in the arts.

"So it made logical sense to allow the channel to reach more people," explains Edgar-Jones, who says he is now going out again to sample the arts. Recent forays have included a local art-house cinema in north London and the opera, socially distanced of course, at

Urban Myths: Joan Rivers, played by Katherine Ryan (right), and Barbra Streisand, played by Jessica Barden



Sky

Glyndebourne. He also plays guitar and recently mastered David Bowie's 1970s classic *Starman*.

"Sky is a public service broadcaster," he continues. "Giving Sky Arts away free is part of our service to the public.... I always say to people, 'You won't like everything on the channel, but I guarantee you'll find something that you like.'"

When James Murdoch was running BSkyB in 2005 he purchased the remaining shares in Artsworld that BSkyB didn't already own and turned the channel into Sky Arts. "James deserves a lot of kudos for doing that," says Edgar-Jones. "He's a passionate supporter of the arts and making them more accessible. James pioneered £10 opera tickets for people who wouldn't normally go to see a live opera."

Could having a bigger audience eventually lead to more advertising revenue when the market begins to turn? "You might not believe this, but we haven't had a commercial discussion," replies Edgar-Jones. "We think we'll reach a bigger audience, which is attractive to all the partners we work with."

"I'm passionate about this channel.

Having run it for five or six years, I've always wanted to get it to more people. The business has always supported Sky Arts as something that doesn't have to be massively commercial or populist. I don't get judged on ratings.

"It enhances the Sky brand. From a Sky perspective, that's a very positive thing. There is no commercial pressure around the channel.

"In fact, quite the opposite. I'm encouraged to do things that are bold, noisy, creative, and to encourage new work, help support the arts and help support arts practitioners," says Edgar-Jones, who, in common with many viewers, enjoyed *Grayson's Art Club*, with Grayson Perry, on Channel 4 during the early weeks of lockdown.

How, then, will Sky Arts change when it is free? Might it become less eclectic and more populist, perhaps more pop and less Prokofiev?

"We're not afraid of being popular and accessible," he says. "There's a wide range of stuff on the channel. At one end of the scale, we can do *Portrait Artist of the Year*, which we expect to become more popular still, while also doing 15 hours of *The Ring* cycle in German in one sitting."

Thankfully, not everything on Sky Arts requires that kind of dedication or stamina. Upcoming shows this autumn include: series 4 of *Urban Myths*, including Steve Pemberton starring in *Les Dawson's Parisienne Adventure*; live coverage of ENO's first drive-in opera, a new production of *La bohème*; *No Masks*, a new drama from Theatre Royal Stratford East based on the pandemic stories of key workers in east London; *Life & Rhymes*, a celebration of the spoken word hosted by Benjamin Zephaniah; and Danny Dyer on Harold Pinter.

"A lot of our work is trying to think of ways to work beyond television. We're uniquely positioned to be more than just a TV channel. We can commission in the real world and meet people in a way that other channels can't," says Edgar-Jones. "We're moving beyond being a spectator in the arts to being an active participant. We want to get communities involved in creating art with us."

An example of this approach is a new show, *Landmark*, in which artists and local communities across the UK attempt to create a new British landmark. "We want artists to be at the forefront of our programmes and not presenters," he says.

Sky doesn't reveal its programme budgets. Edgar-Jones says it is less about their size than where the money goes. "In the arts, every practitioner is able to stretch things further than people who buy drama can," he notes wryly.

Edgar-Jones needs no reminding of the existential crisis that arts organisations are undergoing and is anxious that "a layer of new talent", potentially a forgotten generation, risks being extinguished by the pandemic's economic impact.

Sky Arts is looking at what it can do: a bursary scheme is being set up to support new and diverse voices in the arts industry.

He concedes that, overall, British broadcasters need to try harder on diversity: "We have to do a lot more. It's been a perennial problem. There has been scheme after scheme after scheme. Sky has put money into some of these.

"We've made great strides.... When I started in television, diversity was about whether you were from Oxford or Cambridge [Edgar-Jones went to neither]. Television has come a long way from that. We include voices from all communities." ■



Brand recognition is only half the story

It was easier in the old days – if a show was good enough, families in their millions watched it from their living rooms. But as choice, channels and platforms mushroomed, finding an audience for a programme became more complicated. The fight to be heard now requires broadcasters to break out to digital platforms, mobile devices and new audiences – who increasingly receive their recommendations from social media.

An RTS event in July looked at whether TV brands can still cut through and find an audience in today's cluttered landscape. Yes, said the panel of experts assembled for the event, but only those broadcasters with the best content and strongest brands would prosper.

"It's a crowded marketplace and

An RTS event showed how platforms and broadcasters can cut through digital clutter

highly competitive, and you've got to make stuff that people want to watch. I honestly believe that, if you do that, you cut through," said Zaid Al-Qassab, Channel 4's chief marketing officer.

"In a world of massive choice, of different platforms and different content, you need brands more than ever," he said. "That's how you know what to trust and what to watch.

"It's all very well with an exciting show that's already built credibility and you've heard of, but, with the plethora

of new shows out there, you don't watch those unless they're coming from a trusted brand."

Selma Turajlic, co-founder and COO of digital broadcaster and producer Little Dot Studios, however, stressed the importance of content over brand: "This idea that we are creating brands and destinations just doesn't cut it any more. What drives engagement and audience attachment is content.

"The fundamentals of how we make and broadcast television are being challenged because of the fragmentation of the audience."

For traditional broadcasters, she said, the challenge was to keep their "core linear-TV audiences, but also to start to talk to those who are not sitting in front of a TV screen".

Turajlic added: "We're all trying to

figure out how we get heard, make meaningful connections and make audiences *our* audiences.”

“I wholly believe in the importance and value of brands,” said Rob Campbell, at the time the executive strategy director for EMEA at advertising and marketing agency R/GA. If he didn’t, as an ad man, Campbell conceded, he would be “fired immediately”.

Campbell argued that “great brands know very clearly who their audiences are and where they’re going”. He conceded that content was “obviously important”, but noted that too many brands “churn any stuff out”. He pointed to Apple: “It has got a lot of money to spend and it is having a hard time right now.”

A platform is more than the sum of its content, Campbell added. A broadcaster needs to understand “what the soul of a brand actually is, its positioning and who it is appealing to”.

Zaid Al-Qassab identified the Channel 4 brand as one that “champions diversity and unheard voices, that is constantly taking risks. It’s not mainstream and yet tries to produce entertaining, engaging and broadly accessible stuff despite all of that. That’s a hard balance to find and, because we’ve found that balance for decades, people know that’s what we’re for.”

Netflix enjoys a supremely recognised brand and was a recurring subject during the RTS lunchtime discussion. “Netflix, what a nightmare – a global platform, so much money – it has absolute freedom to release stuff in the way that it wants,” said Turajlic.

Campbell said he found it fascinating that everyone looked at Netflix and wanted to be more like Netflix. “That’s literally playing into Netflix’s hands because no one is going to be better than Netflix.... What everyone should be doing is embracing who they really are and what they really stand for.”

Warming to the subject, he added: “When [Netflix] gets something right, you go, ‘Oh, my God, that’s fantastic.’ But there’s a shitload of content there that is just horrific. I could say that about every network in some respects.”

A lot of content, argued Turajlic, was driven by data and algorithms: “It’s not just about making the content, it’s how you get that content seen in an economic landscape that is extremely challenging. Like it or not, you’re forced to understand that data.”

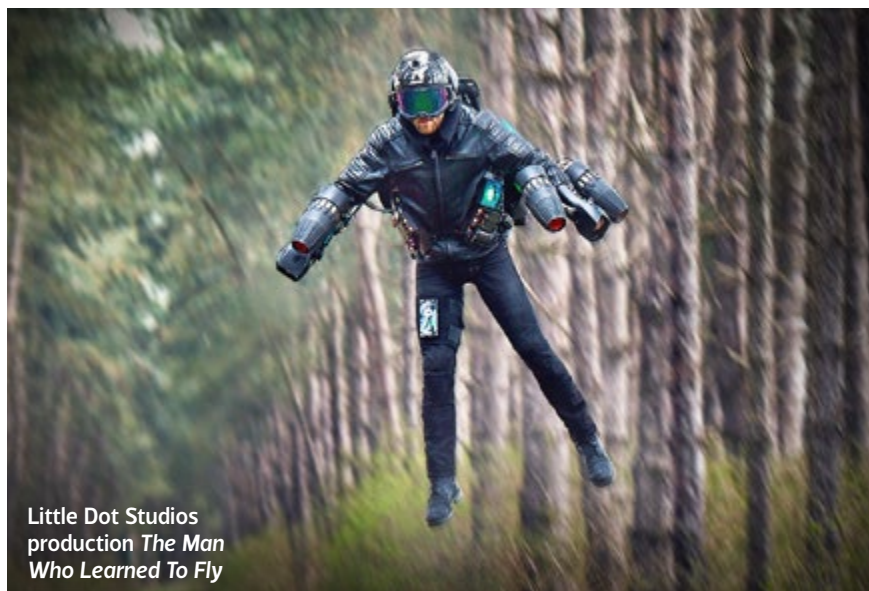
She continued: “In the world of social platforms, you’ve got data

coming out of your ears.” But her background in digital television counted for little when it came to making social media content at Little Dot Studios: “[We were] absolutely clueless, [I] had to relearn everything.”

Turajlic maintained, however, that data did not dictate the creativity behind the content, which was based on coming

terms of what you’re making,” said Campbell.

“I don’t think many of the channels today will remain successful if they try to be old-fashioned linear brands as linear viewing declines,” said Al-Qassab. “At Channel 4, we’re pretty agnostic about where people consume our content as long as it’s fantastic content



Little Dot Studios
production *The Man
Who Learned To Fly*

Channel 4

up with “the right idea with that digital DNA that understands the audience we’re trying to talk to”. Data, though, *could* determine the way that content was edited, its length and scheduling.

All4 had more than 23 million active registered users, revealed Al-Qassab, which the company used to “understand” and “develop better content for” its audience. Data, he said, “is going to become a more important part of the ecosystem”.

Campbell, however, denied that data was a miraculous silver bullet. “It’s a moment of understanding. Ultimately, if you only go with what the data’s told you, you’re basically trying to move forward using the rearview mirror.

“Data has huge value but it also needs an understanding of who you are and where culture is heading. Data gives understanding rather than answers.”

The RTS event featured two audience polls, the first of which asked: “Will channel brands matter in five years?” Almost no one thought brands would disappear, but around 50% of the sample thought that broadcasters’ catch-up brands would be more important than their linear-TV services.

“People are going to decide how to watch [your content] – you don’t get that choice. But you do get a choice in

that’s on-brand. I think that’s the way forward. As Rob rightly said, ‘You can’t out-Netflix Netflix.’”

A second poll asked how broadcasters were faring with their brands: Disney and the BBC were thought to be doing best; Apple TV+, worst.

The panellists were largely positive about the future of broadcasters. “They’re not stupid,” said Rob Campbell. “[Although] the landscape will change, it doesn’t mean they will disappear. They can play a really valuable role in it.”

“It’s not scary at all [for Channel 4],” said Al-Qassab. “Will it look different? Of course, it will look different. There’ll be some players you haven’t even heard about who do it brilliantly; there’ll be some old guard who don’t learn and change fast enough who go by the wayside. But we are very well positioned as a brand... and, as Rob kindly said, ‘we’re not stupid.’” ■

Report by Matthew Bell. The RTS event ‘TV brand cut-through re-envisioned: How do you find an audience in an increasingly cluttered video landscape?’ was held on 9 July and chaired by Boyd Hilton, entertainment director of Heat magazine. The producers were David Amodio, Kate Bulkley and Liz Reynolds.

Making successful factual TV drama is fraught with difficulties. The stakes are even higher when programme-makers tackle real-life events – and no more so when they are as recent and raw as the ones depicted in the summer hit BBC One’s three-parter *The Salisbury Poisonings*.

The series portrays the shocking and incredible events that occurred in the Wiltshire cathedral city when Russian military intelligence officer and double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, who was visiting from Moscow, were hospitalised after being poisoned by the Russian nerve agent Novichok in March 2018.

For *The Salisbury Poisonings*, screenwriters Declan Lawn and Adam Patterson needed to fashion a compelling narrative without being cavalier with the truth. “To what extent can you use dramatic licence? That is the most fundamental question in factual drama,” Lawn told the RTS in July. “All drama, whether it’s theatre or a screenplay, has a set of rules. You can write a three- or five-act structure. There are things that have to happen, but there has to be conflict and it has to be resolved.

“As a factual dramatist, you have to integrate real life, which is often messy, with the prescribed rules of television drama. That is hard to do.

“It takes a long time but, on this show, we were blessed. What unfolded in Salisbury was inherently dramatic. There was lots of conflict and chaos. It felt a bit like the movie *Jaws* – you have this invisible threat taking over a small city. It lent itself to drama. We put a lot of work into making sure that we were factually right. I think, factually, we are right on almost everything.”

That is a bold claim and one unlikely to be made lightly, given that the background of both Lawn and Patterson is in investigative journalism, rather than TV drama. Having worked together since 2013, the pair turned to drama because they wanted to do something more creative.

“Investigative journalism tends to be about how the world works. Drama is about how people work,” said Lawn. “We had a vision of making a kind of factual drama that could encompass both of those things.”

Inevitably, winning their first commission proved difficult: prior to what became *The Salisbury Poisonings*, their

The writers of *The Salisbury Poisonings* tell the RTS why gaining the confidence of local people was critical to the drama’s success



Salisbury Journal

Real-life drama in Salisbury in 2018

Time for the truth

scripts were all rejected, though some nearly made it through.

“Your first big rejection is such a blow,” said Lawn. “It’s hard to describe the disappointment but, the more it happens, the more you get used to it. You realise that the chances of a script getting made are quite slim.

“When *The Salisbury Poisonings* was

commissioned, we weren’t expecting it. We knew the BBC liked our writing, but we’d been there before.”

The idea to tell the story of what happened in Salisbury in the spring and summer of 2018 via TV drama came from Toby Bruce, head of development at independent producer Dancing Ledge. “We had an affinity for

telling stories and the ability to discover new info, so Toby sent us to Salisbury to see if there was a story to be told,” said Lawn. “We were told to ‘have a sniff around and discover if there’s a way to tell this global story that we haven’t already heard.’”

At first, he and Patterson were sceptical: “We weren’t sure it was a good idea. The world’s media had been in Salisbury for almost a year. There had been saturation coverage. Everyone knew the story. Why were we going there?”

“Eventually, we found something that not many people knew about – the story where the heroes are ordinary people, civil servants, NHS workers, people who’ve been ignored by history. Their lives aren’t juicy enough for drama, but the BBC trusted us to tell those stories, which is why I think the drama resonated so well.”

At first, they approached the task by doing what they’d always done at the start of a journalistic investigation – listing everyone they wanted to talk to and making some relevant contacts.

They were helped by Caroline Bannock, *The Guardian*’s community editor, who lived locally. She introduced them to several of the families whose lives had been transformed by the poisonings.

One of the key characters in the drama is Tracy Daszkiewicz, at the time of the poisonings director of public health for Wiltshire, played by Anne-Marie Duff. “We chose Tracy because her story was amazing,” explained Patterson. “When we came out of the first meeting with her, Declan and I looked at each other and said: ‘That’s the story.’ Also, it hadn’t been heard before. She was the glue binding the society together after it had been torn apart.”

Another seminal meeting was with Ross Cassidy, Sergei Skripal’s neighbour, who was initially reluctant to talk. Bannock provided the introduction.

“He didn’t entirely dismiss us – he said he’d think about it. A few days later, he called me and agreed to meet me, again at his house. During that second meeting, I spent three of the most interesting hours of my journalistic life,” said Lawn.

Added Patterson: “Caroline would often ask us, ‘Why are people like Ross Cassidy talking to you when they haven’t spoken to anyone else? You’re getting stories that haven’t been told before. Everyone’s tried but they’ve come away empty-handed.’”

What the two screenwriters did have



The Salisbury Poisonings

BBC

that deadline-chasing Fleet Street and local journalists lacked was the luxury of time: the BBC paid them for six months to research the story, with no guarantee that it would be made.

Patterson explained: “We told people, ‘This is a big ask, you’re going to be putting your lives out there for the world to judge. It’s going to change your life and we can’t exactly tell you how it will change your life. And you’re going to have to trust us, people you don’t know. We’re not going to call you and ask you if you’ve made your mind up – it’s up to you to get back to us.’”

“That is why people start to trust you. Not only that, you collaborate with them through the whole process.”

This was particularly true of the Sturgess family. Dawn Sturgess was the only person to die as a result of the poisonings – her partner gave her a birthday present of what he believed was a bottle of perfume that had been dumped by the Russian poisoners in a skip, which, tragically, contained Novichok.

Dawn’s parents felt that elements of the press had created the wrong impression of their daughter. The writers were able to set the record straight.

Lawn said: “They felt their daughter had been misrepresented and caricatured in the national media as a drug addict, which she wasn’t, and as someone who was homeless, which she wasn’t. She did have alcohol addiction problems but was making great steps

at getting them under control.”

Unusually, the programme was commissioned solely on the basis of Lawn and Patterson’s research and without a script. That came later.

Throughout the discussion, the writers stressed the collaborative process of making the drama. “We weren’t precious about the script,” Lawn said. “We had between 40 and 50 drafts of each episode. There were so many voices coming in. It might sound horrific, writing by committee, but the job of a TV dramatist is to be a rewriter, a collaborator and not to be a novelist.”

Ultimately, it was the determination to double down and get to the truth of the story that enabled Lawn and Patterson to succeed in telling their version of the poisonings.

“At the end of the day, the best yardstick was that all of the real people who were in the show watched it a couple of months before it aired and said, ‘Yeah, that’s essentially what happened, even if it’s not the literal truth,’” said Lawn. “As soon as we had their sign-off, we thought that, ethically, we were in a good place.” ■

Report by Steve Clarke. ‘Q&A – Writing The Salisbury Poisonings’ was an RTS Northern Ireland event held on 6 July. Declan Lawn and Adam Patterson were interviewed by Scott Duffield, Chair of RTS Futures Northern Ireland, who also produced the session.

Diversity: Ofcom prioritises actions over words

Vikki Cook responds to Marcus Ryder's article in our last issue by outlining what Ofcom is doing to improve minority ethnic representation in television



John Boyega as Leroy Logan
in *Small Axe*, made by BBC
Studios and Amazon Studios

The thought, back in January, that 2020 was going to be a challenging year now feels like the understatement of the century. Shortly after the pandemic took hold in the UK, we slammed into lockdown and everyday life as we knew it was upended.

Covid-19 dominated every headline. Viewers tuned into the news in record numbers as reports of its merciless spread and millions of victims shook us to the core. But then came the horrific story of another victim who was also shown no mercy. The deplorable killing of George Floyd, in May, sent shockwaves through our society.

The subsequent outpouring of hurt and anguish on to the streets of cities across the globe rightly forced every one of us to sit up and listen. It triggered long-overdue conversations about the inequality that persists throughout modern life.

Within Ofcom, our Race (Raising Awareness of Culture and Ethnicity) network led many discussions and held a mirror up to the organisation, which revealed just how much more we have to do. We will continue to talk. We will continue to listen. We will prioritise actions over words.

Broadcasters played a vital role in keeping this debate in the public eye. Alongside daily coverage, they aired hard-hitting and thought-provoking dramas and documentaries.

Like so many industries, broadcasters have struggled in achieving greater diversity and equality in their workforces over the years.

Since joining Ofcom four years ago, I have overseen our diversity and inclusion work within the broadcast sector. Before that, I spent more than 20 years working at the heart of broadcasting. It's an industry full of brilliantly creative people and is increasingly diverse – but not enough.

The reaction to George Floyd's killing highlights how the debate around diversity in the media industry goes to the heart of the wider conversation about social inequality. Broadcasters must work harder to be leaders of change.

The UK is a rich mix of cultures and identities that people rightly expect to see reflected on-screen and within creative industries. We know, from our extensive audience research, be it our representation and portrayal review, our review into news and current affairs or our current review into PSB,

BBC

“Small screen: Big debate”, that people want to see and hear people like themselves portrayed on-screen.

Greater diversity in front of and behind the camera – and among decision-makers – is key.

Ofcom’s voice is also crucial here. We use our regulatory powers to hold broadcasters to account in our annual diversity reports, highlighting where things are improving and where broadcasters need to up their game. Because of our work, there is unprecedented transparency as to who is working in TV and radio.

Since launching our “Diversity and equal opportunities in television” work in 2017, we have seen the amount of information on people from under-represented groups working in UK broadcasting grow. This is crucial to help us understand the state of the industry.

The percentage of TV employees from whom data is collected has risen across a number of different characteristics: from 83% to 89% for race/ethnicity, from 49% to 65% for sexual orientation and from 41% to 59% for religion or belief.

The representation of people from minority ethnic backgrounds increased from 11% to 13% across the industry as a whole, compared with 12% of the general UK working population. This is far below the equivalent figures for the major UK cities, such as London (36%), where most broadcasters have their head offices.

And we need to see more progress at senior levels in television, where representation stands at just 8%.

But it is not just in data that we are making a difference. Our close relationship with broadcasters of all shapes and sizes enables us to further influence attitudes and drive real change in the sector. With the support of a panel of independent experts, we have been able to highlight some of the different ways inequality is present within broadcasting. We held the first ever industry round table on social mobility, which focused on socio-economic status in the sector. We revealed in our 2019 report that TV workers were twice as likely to have attended a private school as the average person in the UK.

We believe that increasing social mobility in the sector is one of the key hurdles to overcome, which is why it will also be at the heart of our own new diversity and inclusion strategy, out later this year.

This year, we will again assess

broadcasters’ delivery against their public commitments, with an even greater focus on people from minority ethnic backgrounds. We will expose the employment trends for different minority ethnic groups. We will also look at how broadcasters have considered diversity in their commissioning decisions. This is pivotal to increasing opportunities for minority ethnic talent and other under-represented groups, off and on screen.



Noel Clarke in ITV's *Viewpoint*

Audiences expect high-quality content that reflects the world they live in. And talented people across the UK expect to have opportunities in the broadcasting industry – wherever they come from. Ofcom’s role in making this happen is more important than ever.

Covid is creating the risk that diversity in the industry will be eroded. If companies cut back on recruitment and risk-taking, there is a fear that broadcasters may revert to tried and tested “factory settings” within commissioning as the production sector fires up and scrambles to meet an unprecedented demand for content.

But there is also an opportunity to place diversity at the heart of future recruitment drives. Collaboration is more important than ever. One of our key messages to broadcasters throughout 2020 has been to collaborate more, so that equality of opportunity can be achieved throughout the sector.

We are supporting that goal of shared working by hosting regular round tables with broadcasting diversity leads. And we are agreed on the need for shared best practice and collective action. New cross-industry initiatives are currently in development as a result.

Critics often become frustrated by what they perceive to be a lack of progress – and I have shared similar frustrations in the past – but recent events have forced an acceleration in thinking and brought about a change of pace and commitment from the very top of the industry.

It would be unfair of me to single out individuals, but I can honestly say that I am working today with some of the most dynamic diversity leads within

our major broadcasters. These are people, working closely with those at the apex of those organisations, who are driving genuine change. So, with this renewed focus, I am optimistic for the future.

At Ofcom, we, are also working on ways to improve our own diversity. We will do more and faster, to better reflect the society we serve. We acknowledge that we, too, have further to go, specifically on ethnicity at senior levels, broadening the diversity of our boards and advisory committees, and improving our own data.

As we emerge from the current crisis, we will continue to work with industry leaders to hold them to account and challenge inequalities. We will continue to listen, learn and work with partners committed to this cause.

From the shocking events that have dominated 2020, we must pull together to seize this unique chance and make a lasting difference.

We are unequivocal in our message to industry – the time for talking has passed, the time for action is now. ■

Vikki Cook is Ofcom’s director, content and media policy.



A lesson for the BBC's future?

James Purnell tells Miranda Sawyer how the BBC acted fast to transform its education service in lockdown – and why he's a licence-fee fundamentalist

BBC

Few media initiatives during the pandemic have been as successful or as significant as the expansion of the BBC Bitesize education service. For parents attempting to homeschool their offspring while also working from home, having famous faces such as Marcus Rashford or David Attenborough helping children with their lessons was nothing less than a lifesaver.

No wonder the BBC's director of radio and education, James Purnell, who helped spearhead the service, sounded so confident and relaxed during a recent RTS event, when he was interviewed by *The Observer's* radio critic, Miranda Sawyer. "Amazingly, we provided an entirely new education

service in lockdown – 10 hours of new TV a week, 150 lessons a week, which hit a chord with the public," he said.

Bitesize Daily lessons attracted record numbers, as 3 million children tuned in on day one.

The need for a rapid response to the coronavirus crisis for once forced the BBC to ignore traditional processes and regulatory hurdles. Consequently, the expanded service was up and running at record speed. "We had an education service and lots of resources that we could suddenly point at this crisis. We were able to think about what the audience needed," Purnell recalled. "We found the money quickly.

"In difficult circumstances we were able to move faster than we can some other times, because of that very clear

intent. It was a moment of crisis that galvanised people. The commercial sector was brilliant in saying, 'Fine, you can use our content'. We cut through a whole bunch of licensing and rights issues.

"I do think that there is a general lesson for the future in how we can move quickly.... We created a new education service in four weeks – maybe we can bring that to our business as usual."

Time will tell if the BBC, so often criticised for being a management-heavy organisation that moves slowly, can be as fleet of foot in the future.

Purnell, who was once regarded as a future Director-General, not to mention leader of the Labour Party, acknowledged that *Bitesize Daily's* success had

helped to enhance the BBC's reputation after what had been, in the months before lockdown, a politically trying time for the corporation.

He said: "Public service broadcasting is important in normal times but, in a moment of crisis, we are reminded why we need public service media.... The BBC has always been more than a broadcaster. We've always been there to make a difference to people and to society."

Purnell denied that, under a government led by Boris Johnson and his influential advisor Dominic Cummings, the BBC was "in peril". But he acknowledged that it faced "jeopardy", particularly from the US streamers and tech companies: "There's unlimited money. People can come into this market and say, 'I'm going to have a go at TV and my minimum [programme] budget is a million quid'."

"Having said that, I think we've got a very clear plan [to deal with that] and I think it's working, both with iPlayer, Sounds and podcasts. That consumption is broadly making up for the loss of linear consumption. People sometimes ask, 'Isn't there a tension between those two?'; but we absolutely feel the opposite."

Purnell told Sawyer that he saw growing synergies between the traditional radio networks and the controversial BBC Sounds app, which hasn't always pleased everyone.

He explained the BBC's thinking: "Can we provide the kind of scheduled, lean-back experience that radio provides, but with the benefit of personalisation? We're going to try to innovate what true digital radio can be within Sounds, a bit like we did with iPlayer, which grew a whole new sector of the market."

"Maybe we can do that with radio and provide a continuation of the radio habit for young people. If we can find a way of making radio more relevant to young people, can we make sure that in 10 or 20 years, linear radio is just as healthy as it is today?"

The pandemic had posed some tough technical and editorial challenges for BBC Radio. But despite 90% of staff working from home and growing competition from new stations such as Times Radio – and the unwillingness of younger listeners to tune in

to radio rather than listen to podcasts, Spotify and other digital platforms – Purnell said that audience figures had held up.

He revealed that, at the beginning of the crisis, the BBC had considered closing some of its radio stations when it found it difficult to keep shows on air with many staff working from home and others, including high-profile presenters, reluctant to travel to work.

"At one point, we were planning to close down various stations but, because of the flexibility and ingenuity of our



technical staff, we suddenly found that a lot could be done from home," explained Purnell.

He declined to say which radio networks were earmarked for closure but implied that Radio 4 and Radio 2 were regarded as priorities to keep. "Obviously, we would prioritise stations that were providing information and those with the biggest audience."

In the early days of lockdown, Radio 4 and Radio 5 Live's popularity increased. Later, specialist music stations Radio 1Xtra, Radio 3 and Radio 6 Music benefited from people being stuck at home.

As for the present, he said, "Overall, we're broadly stable but listening time is up compared with before lockdown."

On the vexed question of finance

– the corporation's response to the pandemic, which included delaying the axing of free TV licences for all over-75s, has so far required it to plan an extra £125m of cuts – Purnell said that money was being redeployed to invest more in podcasts, bigger Radio 4 drama budgets and longer investigations.

"We have to be able to move our money because our audiences are moving and because there are new creative opportunities," he stressed.

And quite how the pending licence-fee negotiations will pan out is anyone's guess; a review of the level of the fee is due in 2022. But Purnell, culture secretary in Gordon Brown's Government, described himself to Sawyer as a "licence-fee fundamentalist". He added: "I think that, with every day that goes by, the licence fee is more justified. Look at all the issues people have with what information to trust, making content about our country, making programmes that people can see themselves reflected in."

"There's hugely greater choice from streamers but that has not replaced the need for public service media. I think the licence fee, probably modernised, is a very good way of funding that."

Another hot potato for the BBC is diversity, no more so than in recent weeks. Purnell admitted that, in the immediate aftermath of George Floyd's murder, he had failed to comprehend the enormous impact of the crime on so many people: "I followed it as a news story, but I simply hadn't understood until Lorna Clarke [BBC Radio's controller of pop] texted me that this was something that was affecting people viscerally."

"They were feeling it themselves. It was because most parts of BBC Radio are naturally diverse that they got to that issue fast; and they created amazing content the next week."

However, he told the RTS, BBC Radio's record on diversity was patchy: "We do know from Ofcom's research that radio is less diverse than TV and we've got further to go than TV." ■

Report by Steve Clarke. 'In Conversation with James Purnell' was an RTS event held on 30 July. The interviewer was Miranda Sawyer, radio critic of The Observer. The session was produced by Sue Robertson and Martin Stott.



Brands and broadcasters must seize the time

Covid-19 has claimed the lives of more than 40,000 people in the UK to date, and almost shut down the TV airtime advertising industry.

Across April and May revenues dropped by more than 50%.

Most citizens were locked down in their homes with their children home-schooled – or not – for close to four months. The world seemed to have gone mad. Worldwide, the message was to wash your hands, wear a face mask, socially distance and pretty much hope for the best.

At the peak of the pandemic, on 25 May, George Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police officers, who subjected him to unnecessary neck compression. Just like that, another black man had died as a result of police brutality.

This was something that we had seen happen many times before, but it had never happened during a

Maria St Louis puts forward a three-point plan to build genuinely diverse teams in the media sector

pandemic, when the world was undistracted by the fast-paced material world we have grown accustomed to. That made a big difference to the consciousness of the global community.

Almost overnight, a second, much older pandemic took centre stage. Around the world, billions responded to it by agreeing that Black Lives Matter. People took to the streets to shout it out loud for all to hear. It seemed like it was impossible to disagree. This show of solidarity across the globe for black lives was something that I had never seen in my lifetime.

It was a great moment but, for me, it also highlighted the idea that black

lives didn't matter before and, quite possibly, might not matter again in the future, when things returned to "normal". This is something that simply cannot be allowed to happen, so it will need bold commitment from broadcasters and brands alike, as they have a huge part to play in shaping the post-pandemic world that we are slowly and cautiously emerging into.

The pre-pandemic world was bustling to the brim and not for the faint of heart. Keeping up with the pace could often feel like running on a never-ending treadmill, while sinking in a swamp, clutching a very tasty, yet overpriced, flat white.

Then, suddenly, the world had been turned on its head, but the economy was pretty much freefalling towards the floor and nobody could stop it – and racism was still rife.

Now, as more of the economy opens up, it is still a scary time: job security is fragile and a recession is looming. However, out of tragedy can come

great triumph. These changed circumstances may drive much-needed change in broadcasting and advertising output. As a black woman who has worked in the broadcast advertising industry for 17 years I, for one, am ready for the change that has been spoken of for quite some time and which now needs to happen.

That said, we have seen lots of positive developments during these unprecedented times. Creativity has had to work to a new set of guidelines and some of the results have been engaging and inspiring.

Channel 4 took the great initiative of Clap For Our Carers at the end of an extended version of *Channel 4 News*. We worked with 39 advertisers to create a three-minute, 30-second commercial, all of it filmed on mobile phones. It featured key employees of various advertisers who were essential to keeping the country running and families fed during the pandemic.

With almost everyone at home in lockdown, this was a perfect example of how brands could create meaningful content and build on their values.

In our ever-changing world, the values of the brands that we consume are increasingly valuable, particularly for the younger generation who are the future.

In order to make this period in history a movement of change, rather than just a moment in time, there will have to be some clear commitments from broadcasters and brands alike. While there are a great many things that could be put in place almost immediately, I want to outline three bold, yet simple, steps that I believe could make all the difference.

1 Practise inclusive leadership

Exclusion is a dis-ease: it is a feeling that lets us know that we don't belong. Therefore, inclusion is the remedy for many, if not all, corporate ills. Great



leaders can change the status quo, inspire and empower all groups of people. It is their responsibility to act on this. It is *not* OK for people to be excluded based on their race.

If there is an ethnic pay gap in your organisation, or black and other ethnic minorities are under-represented throughout your organisation, it is up to you to change it.

Identify the top ethnic talent within your organisation, invest in them, empower them by creating career plans, provide upskilling and create opportunities.

2 Make the shift from 'them' to 'us'

Over the years, there has been a lot of talk about "unconscious bias" as a way of understanding what blocks progression for the black British workforce. Within the corporate world it has been widely accepted as the reason for so much injustice.

Five years ago, this may have been semi-acceptable, but it is high time that this came to an end and a shift made towards "conscious inclusion". This mindset accepts accountability and invites the individual or organisation to look hard at themselves, asking

questions and consciously challenging themselves to do better.

It is time we acknowledged that all human beings are one and accepted that there is no "them", just "us". We must actively strive for a fair and just future in which everyone can thrive and bring their best self to work.

3 Update your supply chain

It is important that nepotism is challenged and not accepted as the norm; meritocracy should be embraced as right and just. There are several black-owned businesses that are doing great work, creating content and concepts, but they still struggle to get consistent work at a decent rate because gatekeepers

block their path and stunt their growth.

The time has come for some space to be made for black-owned businesses to thrive like all others. Don't be a gatekeeper – someone who holds power and consistently declines to work with new people, instead of choosing to give work opportunities to friends without competition. This type of behaviour is deliberate, conscious and biased.

Nobody saw 2020 coming, yet everyone has been impacted by it, for good or bad. I think it is fair to say that it's a wake-up call. Broadcasters and advertisers alike have a part to play in shaping the post-pandemic world. They must decide what they want to stand for as we emerge from these crises. ■

Maria St Louis is agency sales manager at Channel 4 and Chair of the C4 Collective.

Channel 4 has launched the 2020 iteration of the Diversity in Advertising Award, focused on the representation of UK BAME culture in mainstream advertising, with the top brand winning a £1m airtime pot. Full criteria and entry process at lnkd.in/gtdiRNf.

RTS
London

Michael McCarthy received the Lifetime Achievement Award at last year's RTS Craft & Design Awards in recognition of a career that is entering its seventh decade.

Since starting at the BBC in 1961, he has worked on some of the UK's most loved shows, including *Dad's Army* and *The Morecambe & Wise Show*.

In a new RTS London film, *It's All About the Sound*, McCarthy discusses his career at the BBC and as a freelancer with *Strictly Come Dancing* sound supervisor Richard Sillitto, a colleague over many years.

McCarthy is renowned for his work on sitcoms and light entertainment: "I didn't enjoy drama. There were many more technical problems because of the complexity of the artists' movements... boom shadows and trying to get sound out of people standing in corners, which some folk seemed to enjoy tremendously. I found that quite tedious, really. I just want people to walk on, speak up and walk off."

Sound effects, he recalls, came from 78rpm records, "which you would cue up and hopefully play the right one. I



A life in sound at the BBC

didn't on one live drama. I was supposed to play a fog-horn and a horse galloped past – perhaps that's why I didn't do any more drama.

The first *Dad's Army* script he read made little impact on McCarthy: "It's only when the producer, director and cast come together, and

work on it and produce the characters, that it comes to life. I wouldn't be able to see that from the script."

For the *Morecambe & Wise* Christmas specials, he recalls, "something was always pulled out of the bag". One such instance was composer André Previn's appearance in 1971, when Eric uttered the legendary line, "I'm playing all the right notes, but not necessarily in the right order".

"Suddenly," says McCarthy, "this wonderful sketch unfolded in front of our eyes."

McCarthy was also on sound for the famous *The Two Ronnies* "four candles" sketch. "I hate hearing it because, to me, Ronnie Corbett always sounds off mic," he says, laughing.

The sound supervisor has two Baftas, one in 1984 for his work on, among other shows, *The Two Ronnies*; the other, two years earlier, for *The Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy*.

The RTS London film *It's All About the Sound* was produced by Terry Marsh and Philip Barnes. To watch the film and listen to RTS London podcasts, go to: www.rts.org.uk/region/london.

Matthew Bell

AI plugs programming gaps

RTS
London

How do you fill the gaps in programming left by shooting schedules wrecked by Covid-19? Arrow International Media turned to artificial intelligence (AI) to mine its archive – and create new shows.

In late August, RTS London invited a panel of Arrow representatives, chaired by Muki Kulhan, to explain how the factual indie did it.

Production executive

Carrie Pennifer explained that lockdown had meant no shooting or access to the edit suite, and everyone working remotely. Post-production manager Kyran Speirs had more than 20 unfinished programmes to deliver.

A cross-company team brainstormed solutions and turned to the company's cloud-based digital archive for suitable content, but it was not fully logged. To do this

manually would take months, realised post-production consultant Dan Carew-Jones – at which point, the company picked up on previous conversations with GrayMeta about AI.

GrayMeta's Curio system could tap into Arrow's digitised content immediately, providing visual tagging, optical character and speech recognition, and camera metadata extraction.

Carew-Jones gave an example of a search for a policeman, where the system was able to recognise his police badge.

Runner-turned-logger India Goss found that, whereas previously she was laboriously logging shots manually, she was now able to find relevant footage via Curio to offer to the editor. The AI wasn't perfect, but it helped to harvest 2,000 hours of usable content in a few days.

The Arrow team has learned a lot, not least the value of digitising rushes and capturing camera metadata.

Carol Owens

RTS Yorkshire **Matthew Bell** tunes in to a series of conversations on the county's thriving TV industry

Over the summer, RTS Yorkshire talked to some of the leading TV figures in its region about their shows and production issues during the pandemic-enforced lockdown.

Walks Around Britain, which has been on air since 2016, is aimed at regular walkers but also hopes to inspire newcomers. "A lot of people have the idea that walking is 'mountains and mint cake', that you have to go to the Lake District or Scotland," explained series producer and presenter Andrew White.

"Not everybody wants that. I think that a lot of the existing TV programmes still fitted into that genre – it was great walks with a view. Our walks are a conduit to a story and that story might be nature, history or heritage. It's not just the fact that there's a great view at the end."

Filming on the series continued during lockdown. "We have always used a small crew, who are able to work remotely," he said.

The series, which is available both on Prime Video and a number of linear channels, is funded by product placement and broadcasters. "It's like a syndication model in the US, where a company will make a programme and then tout it around various broadcasters. It is quite novel in the UK," said White.

Series producer Nova Productions also offers a *Walks Around Britain* subscription service.



Yorkshire speaks out

Air TV director Matt Richards discussed how the Leeds indie had continued to make programmes, including the RTS Yorkshire award-winning *Helicopter ER*, which follows the work of the Yorkshire Air Ambulance, for Discovery Networks' Really channel, and classic car series *Bangers & Cash*, for UKTV's Yesterday channel.

When the country went into lockdown, Air TV had finished filming 25 episodes of *Helicopter ER* and the third series of *Bangers & Cash*. "We moved into a couple of months of post-production. We weren't filming anything but we had a backlog of stuff to be getting on with," said Richards.

"We're still delivering all the programmes we were due to, on time, and the programmes are on air now."

Richards promised "more of the same if we can", and said the indie had some new shows in development.

"These are difficult times, but we will continue doing the emergency shows and long may *Helicopter ER*, our first programme, continue."

"In the same way that we did with moving into the motoring and nostalgia place with *Bangers & Cash*... we are looking at the international market, but we will still base ourselves proudly in Yorkshire while we are doing it."

Peter Wright and Julian Norton – the "modern-day James Herriot" veterinarians who feature in Channel 5's *The Yorkshire Vet* – discussed their RTS Yorkshire award-winning series, which is made by Daisybeck Studios. Following the lockdown, shooting on farms started again in July with a "trimmed-down team", explained Norton.

Discussing the success of the series, Wright said: "The main stars of the programme are the animals – we just turn up and do our job."

The Yorkshire Vet offers feel-good stories, but "we throw in one or two sad events, too, because, if you sanitise it too much, it ceases to be a true portrayal of what [vets] actually do", he added.

Jo Schofield discussed the emergency relief and mental health support that The Film and TV Charity has provided during the Covid-19 crisis.

Schofield, the manager of the charity's northern hub, said: "There's already an existing crisis around mental health in our industry and, given the current circumstances, that's more important than ever."

"The industry needs to reframe how it works, coming out of this crisis. There is a real opportunity for us to examine how we work and what we can do better." ■

RTS Yorkshire Chair Fiona Thompson interviewed the contributors for the videos at www.rts.org.uk/region/yorkshire.

Matthew Bell looks back over a busy summer of events aimed at TV newcomers

RTS Futures' "CV masterclass" drew on the knowledge of BBC talent executives.

A CV is a "sales pitch", explained Carrie Britton, who recruits for drama and comedy production at BBC Studios. It showcases a person's skills and their suitability for a role, added Caroline Carter, talent executive at BBC Studios' Documentary Unit.

Each receives around 20 CVs a day. They scan them quickly and, if one interests them, they return to it.

Daniell Morrissey, who runs the BBC's production and journalism apprenticeship and trainee programmes, and was chairing the RTS Futures event, asked whether there were rules to writing a CV. "There is no right or wrong. If you're getting an interview, then it's working," said Carter.

However, CVs do require some information to be present and correct: the applicant's name at the top; the role they are aiming to fill;



Dragons' Den

BBC

CVs: the dos and don'ts

contact information; and work experience.

Did the talent executives like weird and wonderful CVs? "I'm not a huge fan," said Carter. "Catching [my] eye is fine, but it needs to be easy to read." Britton added: "We're under a lot of pressure. Think about trying to make our jobs easier [if you

want us] to hire you – keep it simple... [so we can] get the information we need to – hopefully – get you a job."

"By all means, put links on if you've shot your own films," said Carter. "I can't resist a link and often it tells me a hell of a lot about that person," agreed Britton.

A succinct mission statement on the CV won the panel's backing. One example, shared by Morrissey, read: "With two years' experience as a runner on several factual shows, including *Dragons' Den*, I'm now looking for my first move into junior researching."

A section detailing technical, production and people skills also won approval. But don't bother saying you're "hard-working" – that's a given, said Britton.

Career histories should list the most recent job first and include responsibilities and achievements, plus the company and person worked for, the channel that aired the show and the dates of the

contract. Include hobbies as well as education and training. "You never know when any of those interests are going to come in useful," said Morrissey. "I remember seeing 'grime' on someone's CV and I knew that we had a grime doc in development."

Hobbies can give a "bit of quirk and add personality to what can be quite a mundane document", he noted.

Educational information interested Britton: "I'm not looking for some highfalutin degree. I'm just looking for a bit more information about [applicants]."

And what annoyed the talent executives? Too much information in CVs, offered Britton. Spelling names wrong, added Carter. "When it's not clear what you do or what you're offering," concluded Morrissey. ■

The 'RTS Futures CV masterclass', held on 22 July, was produced by Daniell Morrissey, Carrie Britton and Caroline Carter.

How to be a vlogstar

RTS Futures and the Media Trust hosted the 'Vlogstar Challenge' workshop, which offered training in telling stories and engaging audiences, as well as in filming and editing on smartphones.

Now in its fifth year, the Vlogstar Challenge is a competition and training initiative for young people run by the Media Trust and the Jack Petchey Foundation, in partnership with YouTube and the *Evening Standard*.

It helps 16- to 25-year-olds from across London and Essex develop social-media communication skills.

After taking part in the workshop, young people could enter the Vlogstar Challenge competition. The winner will be announced in November and receive prizes that include £500 of production equipment, mentoring from a YouTube professional and work experience with one of the Media Trust's partners.

A joint RTS Futures/ScreenSkills event at the end of July threw the spotlight on the TV commissioning process. “Fundamentally, it’s about deciding what goes on television,” explained Channel 4 commissioning editor Lee McMurray, who described commissioners as a channel’s “gatekeepers” for new ideas and formats.

Fellow commissioning editor Deborah Dunnett added: “We get pitches all day, every day.”

The best are developed and eventually taken to Channel 4 director of programmes Ian Katz, who, hopefully, gives them the green light.

McMurray and Dunnett are part of Channel 4’s factual entertainment team, which is responsible for hit shows that include *Married at First Sight* and *Naked Attraction*.

They were just two of the Zoom panellists offering the inside track on commissioning during a session that was aimed at young people at the start of their television careers.

Genre assistant Amy Menzies described her role as offering admin support to the team: “I set up meetings



Channel 4

Commissioning: the inside track

between commissioners and indies; I organise events and travel.”

Assistant editor Rachel Martin tracks a programme through development and

production to make sure it is delivered on time: “I’m constantly talking to indies, schedulers, the press, and the legal, marketing and social media [departments].”

McMurray said it was “invaluable”, although not essential, to “have been a programme-maker before you’re a commissioner. When you’re at the editing stage and [a programme] hasn’t quite worked... you need to know what to do. You need to speak the same language as the people that you are commissioning.”

Offering advice to young people trying to break into broadcasting, Dunnett said: “Hoover up TV.”

She added: “Know what TV is being made on your doorstep and, if you appreciate it, write to the makers and tell them... why you appreciate it.”

Yasmin Mehmet explained about 4Talent, which offers training and apprenticeship schemes. “If you’re really interested in Channel 4, love what it does and want to be a part of it, [apprenticeships] are a good way in,” she said. “We are trying to get new and exciting people into the industry.” ■

The RTS Futures/ScreenSkills event ‘Getting into broadcast-ing’ was held on 30 July. It was chaired and produced by Channel 4 commissioning editor Becky Cadman.

ITV offers tips to new talent

■ In a wide-ranging RTS Futures seminar, ITV talent managers answered questions from people at the very start of their careers in television.

The qualities that talent managers look for to fill entry-level jobs include enthusiasm, passion and determination, said Cheryl Woodcock, who recruits for ITV’s entertainment shows.

‘I love having a nose around at what people have done, if I’ve got the time, when

someone puts [links to] a showreel on their CV,’ she said.

‘Do your homework, make sure your CV has no typos in it,’ added Tracy Walker, a talent executive at ITV Studios North.

But don’t put your own picture on the CV, chorused the panel as one.

And, stressed Rosalind Malthouse, a talent manager at MultiStory Media: ‘You don’t need to be able to shoot or edit to get a job in TV... Soft, people skills are also really useful.’

A degree, even in film and TV production, is not a prerequisite for a career in TV. ‘At entry level, it doesn’t really matter what degree you have, as long as you know why you’re approaching us,’ said Nikki Ryan, Malthouse’s colleague at MultiStory Media, which is part of ITV Studios.

She added: ‘The more experience you have, the more employable you are.’

Malthouse said: ‘The competition is so fierce to get in.

I’m only looking for people who want to make the programmes we make, rather than someone who’s desperate to get their foot in the door and get any job in any genre.’

‘Getting your foot in the door anywhere is really tough at the moment,’ said Woodcock. ‘Cut yourself a bit of slack – you may not progress as quickly as you might have done had Covid-19 not happened.’

‘ITV talent manager Q&A’ was held on 8 July. It was chaired by Rachel Hatton and produced by Alex Wootten for RTS Futures.

RTS Bursaries Megan Fellows sums up after a series of groundbreaking seminars for RTS bursary students

Five events offered wide-ranging advice and expert opinions to young people hoping to make their career in TV.

ITV series producer Lewis Evans and casting producer Henry Byrne explained how they cast shows such as *Love Island* and *Saturday Night Takeaway*. First and foremost, they agreed, you need an ear and eye for people – thinking outside the box is what sets good casting apart.

The online audience of bursary students were keen to get the inside scoop on all things *Love Island*. How did the team behind the hit show keep it fresh from series to series? Evans argued that casting was key – finding that next Dr Alex or Molly-Mae – and also offering something new.

Many islanders aim to become influencers or celebrities through appearing on the show, but Evans said that he always tries to manage contestants' expectations. At its core, he added, *Love Island* is a dating show and anything else that comes from it – whether that be fame or fortune – is a bonus.

At an event devoted to mental health, bursary scheme alumni Abigail Freeman and Kyle Shiels – both of whom graduated from Leeds University with broadcast journalism degrees – attested to the scheme's importance in offering financial and networking help, but also emphasised the emotional and social support it gives.

Shiels turned down a job

TV's summer school



offer straight out of university to work for a well-known London-based production company, concerned that the hustle and bustle of London – and the high living costs – would have been problematic.

Having decided that he wanted to merge his passions – television and sport – he currently works as a self-shooting researcher for BBC One's *A Question of Sport*.

STV hosted two events in July. Its Canadian head of news and current affairs, Steven Ladurantaye, offered an insight into broadcast journalism. He cut his journalistic teeth working at a tabloid newspaper in Canada, where he learnt to “knock on doors and talk to people”. Eventually, he became managing editor at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

Ladurantaye discussed the cultural differences between

news in Britain and his homeland. His hands-on approach to working in a newsroom proved something of a culture shock to colleagues when he relocated from Canada to the more hierarchical management structures of a British newsroom in 2018.

STV Productions' creative director of factual, Craig Hunter, gave a masterclass on how to nail a commission. He said ideas should be fully interrogated before a pitch. Ask yourself: why should this story be heard now and, more importantly, what is new to say about this subject?

Hunter said the strongest ideas always offer the promise of a revelation – a new truth or insight to a perhaps well-known story.

He concluded: “You may have the best idea in the world, but you need to be able to sell it clearly and

succinctly. Clarity is everything in this game.”

The final bursary event of a busy summer offered students a look into the inner workings of the technical side of the BBC. From cyber-security to augmented reality, the session showed the breadth of roles open to engineering, science and technology graduates in TV.

David Johnston, a lead producer in BBC Research & Development, gave the students a crash course in virtual and augmented reality, while Gary Payne discussed opportunities in his Information Security department.

Technology demonstrator James Hand gave students a peek at the BBC's answer to Amazon's Alexa, the highly anticipated “Beeb”. Mark Smith, resourcing specialist for BBC Schemes, gave an overview of the entry-level routes into the BBC. ■

E-sports experts took centre stage to discuss the technology behind their booming industry at an RTS Thames Valley colloquium over three days in mid-July.

In 2019, e-sports audiences reached 443 million world-

wide, revealed Guillaume Neveux, business development manager, EMEA, at EVS Broadcast Equipment. They are predicted to rise to 495 million this year and 646 million in 2023. Revenues are expected to pass \$1.1bn this year.

"More than 100 million people watched the [battle arena game] *League of Legends World Championship*, cementing its place as the most popular e-sport," said Neveux.

The first of the three one-hour sessions saw Steven "Claw" Jality, global head of streaming for ESL Gaming, introduce some of the games played, including *League of Legends* and *StarCraft*. He defined e-sports as "competitive multiplayer video gaming", which differ from traditional sports by using specific video-gaming products, not just types of games.

Looking to the workflow, Jality discussed the similarities between broadcast sport and e-sports, and demonstrated two main differences: in-game and distribution. "In-game is the virtual playing field where the players



League of Legends World Championship 2019

Riot Games

E-sports on the rise

are competing," he said. "In-gaming tells the story of the match. It replaces the cameras and is the image the audience sees, but it also contains many of the traditional shots seen on television, such as audience and reaction shots."

Streaming and live content distribution are very different to traditional sports, as there is no charging service – the audience expects the content to be free online, explained Jality.

Anna Lockwood, head of global sales at Telstra Broadcast, presented the Zoom session on the first day.

On day two, Paul Martin, VP marketing and broadcast business development at Vecima Networks, discussed the technical aspects of streaming e-sports to audiences using content delivery networks (CDNs): "The investment being made by telco operators around the world in their networks is what is enabling more and more viewers to take on the services."

He explained how CDNs improve the delivery of streamed media in terms of push vs pull systems. Traditional broadcasting uses a one-size-fits-all push

system, whereas e-sports streaming uses a more efficient, tailored pull solution.

On the final day, Neveux discussed e-sports production from the perspective of a broadcast solutions provider: "E-sports productions are very much like traditional broadcasts. They need replays, slo-mos, match recaps, studios, commentators, and national and international takers." However, 80% of the image sources provided are computer-generated.

The three e-sports sessions can be watched at bit.ly/32SnKwm.

Tony Orme

The future of trade shows

■ With so many technology events cancelled this year, RTS Thames Valley discussed the future of trade shows. At a late-July event, 'The future of shows', Darren Woolfson of Molinare, Abby Parsall (Boxer Systems), Ciaran Doran (Rohde & Schwarz), MC Patel (Emotion Systems) and Mark Birchall

(Tradefair) formed an impressive panel, chaired by Penny Westlake (Interra Systems).

The consensus was that trade shows were an excellent networking opportunity, but there were divisions on their future relevance, even allowing for the easing of Covid-19 restrictions. Broadcast-specific hardware is

diminishing in importance and software can often be demonstrated in better ways.

Trade shows have led to immovable deadlines that drive development engineers to deliver products and salespeople to sell them, yet technology now facilitates the continuous delivery of new features, with

no reliance on shows. Online seminars are proving incredibly successful as they provide greater client reach – not everyone can attend IBC or NAB, but they can watch online.

Trade shows have long provided a critical service for vendors and broadcasters, but change was now inevitable, agreed the panel. The need for social interaction and networking would be key to their future.

Tony Orme

RTS Southern RTS Southern pulled together a panel of industry professionals with many years of expertise developing formats for a discussion in July.

Ricochet's director of programmes, Rob Butterfield, and executive producer Hannah Lamb talked about their hit BBC One show *The Repair Shop*. Butterfield said it tapped into the nation's mood during the coronavirus lockdown: "The importance of family during lockdown and not being able to see our loved ones really seems to have resonated with the themes of the show."

Topical Television MD Chris Riley and executive producer Claire Masters discussed some of their long-running access shows, including BBC One's *Caught Red Handed* and *Close Calls on Camera*, and *The El Houses: Britain's Cheapest Street* for Channel 4.

Sarah Freethy, creator of *The Hotel Inspector* series and now an executive producer for Woodcut Media – known

How to crack a format



BBC

for its successful international crime series *World's Most Evil Killers* – described the essential elements in a format as the four Rs – regular, recognisable, reliable and repeatable. She added that, where possible, a show should tap

into something unique and "of it's time", but also have a broad appeal that could extend past that moment.

The panel agreed that programme-makers should not start with a format, but with an idea that they could

develop into a format. Passion and persistence were key, even when commissioners appeared disinterested in a potential format.

Riley and Lamb argued that formats were hugely important for indies – long-running, repeatable series are the bread and butter for many companies, and allow them to budget reliably, plan ahead and retain talent on longer contracts.

"It was great to get such a unique insight from our panellists. Their passion for formats was clear and it proved hugely useful as a learning exercise – even for those of us who develop on a daily basis," said Kate Beal-Blyth, CEO of Woodcut Media.

Woodcut Media's creative director, Derren Lawford, chaired "Cracking the format: Alchemy or science?".
Stephanie Farmer



TV sports shine in a summer of thrills

As summer turns to autumn, let's hear it for all the great live screen sport that's been thrilling us in recent weeks.

On the BBC, we've had World Championship snooker – which gave BBC Four its highest audience of the year – and darts on Sky, normally a staple of its Christmas schedule.

Not forgetting Formula One, the US Open tennis, and World Test Championship cricket on Sky and the conclusion of the Champions League on BT Sport.

Congratulations to all

concerned for showing great ingenuity in bringing sport back to a TV audience.

Hall passes on the conductor's baton

Anyone who missed Tony Hall's valedictory interview with Amol Rajan on Radio 4's *The Media Show* is in for a treat. The full 60-minute version is available on BBC Sounds.

To say it is wide-ranging is an understatement. Topics covered include Jeremy Clarkson's spat with the BBC – the outgoing DG reminds listeners that it led to him being subjected to death threats – his dealings with government, presenter pay and the recent kerfuffle over the Proms.

Also fascinating is his lack of any doubt that he should accept the job when Chris Patten offered

it to him in 2012 following George Entwistle's abrupt departure. 'Every little bit of me knew that I had to do it,' said Hall.

We shall all miss him.

Bird drops mouse for interrobang

Congratulations to high-flyer (ouch) Andy Bird, the veteran Disney executive (and RTS Fellow) appointed last month as the new CEO of Pearson.

With more than 35 years' media experience, Bird recently served as Chair of Walt Disney International.

He joined the Mouse House back in 2004, as President of Disney International. A digital visionary and international man of mystery, he will bring masses of energy to his new mission of 'enhancing people's

lives through lifelong learning' at Pearson – whose logo of an 'interrobang' symbol conveys 'the excitement and fun of learning'.

We gotta get out of this place...

With the lifts out of bounds in Covid-compliant New Broadcasting House, the BBC's radio and education head, James Purnell, recently found himself struggling to find the exit.

Try as he might, he was baffled by the directions until a helpful colleague showed him the correct route out of the building. Take a bow, *Newsnight* presenter Emma Barnett.

Home working might be socially challenging and occasionally claustrophobic but, most of the time, it's hard to get lost on the way to the front door. ■



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