

June 2024

Television



Steven Moffat
explores the

**Culture
wars**

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From the CEO



Whether it's *Downton Abbey*, *Twenty Twelve* or *WIA*, Hugh Bonneville is an actor guaranteed to light up TV screens. He co-stars with Karen Gillan in our June

cover story, *Douglas Is Cancelled*, Steven Moffat's zeitgeist ITV comedy drama about a middle-aged news anchor who becomes a victim of cancel culture.

Don't miss Shilpa Ganatra's look at how *Douglas Is Cancelled* was commissioned – and why Steven decided to tackle such a sensitive topic.

With the Euros starting later this month, and the Paris Olympics not far behind, 2024's great summer of sport is certain to be outstanding. Do read

Matthew Bell's incisive piece on TV sport's enduring popularity and what the coming months have to offer fans.

General elections are pivotal occasions for our medium. As the campaign gets into its stride, don't miss Steve Clarke's fascinating profile of Labour's shadow culture secretary, Thangam Debbonaire, a former professional cellist who was the MP for Bristol West until Rishi Sunak called a snap election.

Away from Westminster, Mark Lawson takes a trip to the Far East to show how the boom in subtitled TV went into overdrive thanks to Netflix's South Korean drama *Squid Game*.

The popularity of media and entertainment podcasts keeps on growing.

The Rest is Entertainment, presented by Marina Hyde and Richard Osman – both of whom are speaking at September's RTS London Convention – is one of a growing number of podcasts devoted to dissecting TV and related topics. Simon Bucks offers an informed guide to some of the hottest audio choices available to discerning listeners.

Finally, the RTS Student Television Awards will be held in London at the IET on 21 June. If you want to get a glimpse of tomorrow's talent, you should be there.

Theresa Wise

Contents

Douglas Is Cancelled (ITV)

- 5 A Channel 5 insider's TV diary**
An anonymous commissioner tells us what working for Ben Frow is really like
- 6 Comfort classic: *Porridge***
Steve Clarke enjoys time with television's immortal jailbird, Norman Stanley Fletcher
- 7 Ear candy: *Heroes & Humans of Football***
Harrison Bennett discovers that economists make by far the best soccer pundits
- 8 Working lives: drama reconstruction**
Lucy Sanders tells Matthew Bell her recipe for dramatically enhancing true crime docs on a tight budget
- 10 Culture wars laid bare**
Steven Moffat explores what happens when a newscaster makes an off-colour joke. Shilpa Ganatra reports
- 12 The writing is on the screen**
Shōgun has won rave reviews but it was *Squid Game* that sparked the boom in subtitled TV drama, says Mark Lawson
- 14 A feast for our ears**
From *Off the Telly* to *The Rest Is Entertainment*, media podcasts are booming. Simon Bucks can't stop listening
- 17 Our Friend in the East**
Chiara Di Filippo discusses the region's future with RTS East Vice-Chair Charlie Gauvain
- 18 Amina is a punk rocker**
We Are Lady Parts returns to Channel 4 – bigger and bolder. Matthew Bell is hooked
- 20 Game on! Our great summer of sport**
The Euros and the Paris Olympics take centre stage, but almost every sport gets a look in. Matthew Bell can't wait
- 22 Ode to joy**
Thangam Debbonaire, the shadow culture secretary and cellist, believes music can change lives, learns Steve Clarke
- 24 Heartbreak, magic and fairy dust**
Lost Boys & Fairies, Daf James's bilingual queer adoption tale, puts the 'drag' in the Welsh dragon, says Caitlin Danaher
- 26 Fings are wot they used t'be**
Matthew Bell investigates why audiences can't get enough of nostalgia TV
- 29 RTS news and events**
Reports of the Society's screenings, events and awards ceremonies from around the UK and Ireland



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TV diary

On the far wall of the programming department at Channel 5, there is a “mood-ometer” – and, on Monday mornings, the mood is not good.

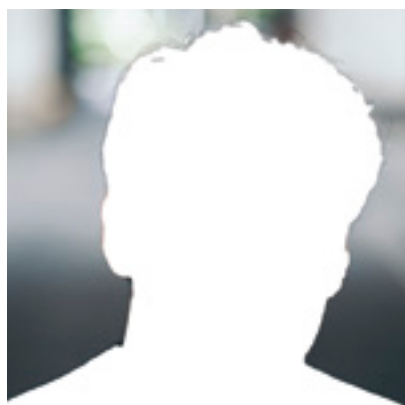
The ratings are always bad at week-ends, so Mondays in the office can sometimes seem like the five stages of grief on fast forward. The trick is to try to get Ben [Frow, Channel 5’s programme supremo] to accept the situation before he starts strolling around the office musing on the other things he could have done with his life. Ennui won’t get us out of our ratings slump.

Thankfully, one thing always works to improve the mood: creative distraction. Ben is a voracious consumer of things. There is nothing he can’t read, watch or listen to and immediately assess what part of it might be good for our audience. He’s like a magpie, picking out the shiny bits of other people’s work – be it music, films, books or programmes by our competitors – and building our nest with whatever he finds.

The answer to the Monday blues is always creativity, and when you aren’t able to summon your own, you lean on other people’s.

■ If Monday’s overarching question is, “What are we going to do?”, then Tuesday’s is: “What if we did... this?”

Tuesdays are a bit more optimistic, because our ever-reliable blue-light content rescues us from Sunday’s ratings slump. At Channel 5, success is measured out in calories: if we get a 5% share for the night, we get pizza. Then, at 5:00pm, we have the



Mood swings, Monday blues and working with a maverick. A Channel 5 insider tells us what it is really like working for Ben Frow

centrepiece of the week – the “week to press” meeting. This is the first time that rival channels show us their entries into next week’s programming “exchange”.

Our schedulers, commissioners, marketers and insight team gather to thrash out any tactical changes we might want to make before tomorrow’s final exchange.

Some weeks, we rip it up and start all over.

Some weeks, we commission ideas in the room. Some weeks, Ben gets so depressed that we give up and go home.... Other weeks, there are drinks, nibbles, and an air of jolly madness in the air.

Jolly madness is something we are very good at.

■ On Wednesday at 11:00am it’s the commissioners’ meeting, when we all group together with Ben to review the bigger picture, update on

business news and generally gossip.

No doubt, Ben will introduce some new initiative, plan, strategy or challenge. Sometimes these are inspired and creative, and we immediately start planning next week’s meeting. Other times, we nod and smile, safe in the knowledge that, by next week, he will have forgotten what he said.

■ The weekly free-to-air ratings meeting has now turned into an unedited version of *This Morning*. One team member gives a round-up of TV gossip and news. Another presents “deal of the day” – discounts available online.

We have a regular astrology slot, a review of local lunch spots – lunch club, complete with jingle – and a weekly play-along quiz. We find out what our audience think of us from Viewer Enquiries.

It’s chaotic, but it makes you glad to work here.

■ Attendance in the office is always light on a Friday, so the small cadre that turns up is dubbed “the Friday Club”.

Friday Club mostly consists of eating breakfast pastries or bagels, and discussing whatever Really, TLC or even QVC (Ben’s favourite channel) is showing today. It’s a good time to get a quick decision on a pressing matter, before the next episode of *My 600-lb Life*.

The world might be a bit gloomy right now, but Fridays in the Channel 5 office are a very happy place and will remain so... until the overnights come in on Monday.

The writer is a Commissioner at Channel 5.

COMFORT CLASSIC



Ronnie Barker as Fletch in *Porridge*

Porridge

Steve Clarke enjoys time with television's immortal jailbird, Norman Stanley Fletcher

Imagine setting a television sitcom in today's run-down, overcrowded British prisons. A non-starter or maybe the darkest of black comedies?

Half a century ago, while the UK lurched from one economic crisis to another, BBC Television was considering whether to make what became *Porridge*. There was an initial reluctance. So much so that, after introducing Cockney jailbird Norman Stanley Fletcher – Fletch – in the 1973 BBC Ronnie Barker series *Seven of One*, for an episode entitled *Prisoner and Escort*,

writers Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais got so tired of waiting for the green light that they crossed the river to London Weekend Television and instead wrote crime caper *Thick As Thieves*, starring Bob Hoskins and John Thaw.

The LWT show was axed after one series. Thankfully, the BBC finally decided to go ahead with a sitcom based on a character who would quickly take his place in the pantheon of all-time comedy greats.

Even so, Clement and La Frenais, who had already discovered sitcom

nirvana with *The Likely Lads* and its sequel, *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?*, expressed doubts about penning a prison-set comedy. "We went round prisons," Clement once told the *Radio Times*, "and got very depressed because the reality is [that] they're not fun."

True, but they are places of confinement and, as every budding sitcom writer knows, being stuck in one place is often the starting point for comedy heaven. Many aficionados cite the *Porridge* episode *A Night In*, in which Fletcher and his cell mate, Lennie Godber (Richard Beckinsale), remain in their cell throughout the entire 30-minute programme, as the show's zenith.

Porridge ran for three series with two Christmas specials, from 1974 to 1977. Throughout, Clement and La Frenais' scripts were masterclasses in deft plotlines and comic dialogue. Here's an example. Fletch: "That's what you've got to tell yourself, you're just having a quiet night in." Godber: "Trouble is, I've got 698 quiet nights in to go."

Ear candy

Soccer's deities and mortals

Porridge's roots lie in kitchen sink drama – downbeat, naturalistic, gritty working-class sagas. The show was ideally suited to an era when an exhausted Britain was presided over largely by the equally worn-out Prime Minister Harold Wilson. In other words, just about as far as you could go from the feel-good factor of, say, *Friends*.

Peter Kay has claimed that *Porridge* introduced pathos to television sitcom. From the opening sequence of the sound of prison doors slamming shut and a judge sentencing Fletcher to five years' bird (voiced by Barker, something he said he later regretted), audiences know they are in for something utterly different.

Barker was a familiar face to TV viewers, having moved from acting in repertory theatre to the warmer comic waters of the long-running BBC flagship comedy sketch show *The Two Ronnies* as Ronnie Corbett's co-star.

The other members of the cast all play their parts to perfection: Fletch's cell mate, the callow Godber, is brilliantly realised by the doe-eyed Beckinsale, then something of a TV sex symbol. There are memorable performances, too, from a young David Jason as the ageing lag, Blanco, while Fulton Mackay is terrific as Fletch's arch enemy, the knowing Scottish warden Mr Mackay.

But make no mistake, this is Barker's vehicle. He dominates every scene. Fletcher is a complex, almost Shakespearean character, whose humanity is apparent despite his guile, the minor scams and obvious criminality.

Genuine TV comedy icons don't come along all that often. Ronnie Barker's Norman Stanley Fletcher is one of them.

Finally, a word of praise for set designer Tim Gleeson. The Home Office refused to give the BBC permission to film *Porridge* in a real prison. With considerable ingenuity, Gleeson fashioned what became HMP Slade, a fictional Category C prison in Cumberland, from a disused water tank, once used for underwater filming, at Ealing Studios. ■

Porridge is available on BBC iPlayer.

The other day, having sat through yet another monosyllabic post-match interview, I was left wondering if footballers have always been this boring. Perhaps it's all the scientific and tactical progress that is stifling their self-expression, as irascible managers reduce them to mere cogs in their ruthlessly demanding, "high pressing" machines.

Or the fact that they are having to surrender their personal lives to relentless fixture lists while their very personalities are sanitised by "media training".

And woe betide anyone who does a Marcus Rashford and pulls a single sickie after a boozy night out.

I was therefore sceptical when Simon Kuper and Mehreen Khan announced their new character-led football podcast, *Heroes & Humans of Football*. Could a single player warrant an hour-long audio profile?

But they swiftly put paid to my doubts in their first, fascinatingly detailed episode on Kylian Mbappé, by affording him the complexity that modern footballers are generally denied by standard sports commentary (and, clearly, me).

Kuper, a columnist and writer on the *Financial Times*, and Khan, who is economics editor of *The Times*, are well qualified to situate their subjects in a wider social and political context.

Mbappé was born in the Parisian suburb of Bondy, so they start by taking us into the heart of the *banlieues* and discussing the French state's pro-football policy in the region.

Kuper, who lives in Paris, guides us

through the city's vast network of artificial pitches and qualified coaches, built to transform these often poor suburbs into the world's biggest talent base.

In the five World Cups between 2002 and 2018, he says, Greater Paris produced 60 of the competitions' players and coaches, more than any other urban area in the world.

Mbappé was one of these 60, as the world's fastest player galloped his way

to a World Cup win at age 19. But Kuper and Khan point out the many hurdles he had to leap: strict parents, who insisted he pass *le bac*; French classism and racism; and the orbital dynamics of his club's solar system of planet-sized egos.

Kuper puts Mbappé's tactful negotiation of all this down to an uncommon emotional maturity.

What was most remarkable about his World Cup win, he says, was just how unfazed the teenaged Mbappé was by the occasion. The day after the final, overlooking the hundreds of thousands of jubilant fans from an open-top bus, Mbappé apparently turned to the then head of the French Football Federation, Noël Le Graët, and asked: "Is this really necessary?"

The only downside to the podcast is that Kuper and Khan don't make the warmest of hosts. But it is the rigorous research and telling anecdotes that make it sing. Having listened to their episodes on Chelsea's former owner, Roman Abramovich (an orphaned survivor of the Soviet Union and "pioneering sportswasher"), and Pep Guardiola (football's philosopher king but also Barcelona's "family man who left"), they were just as illuminating. ■

Harrison Bennett



Heroesandhumans.com

WORKING LIVES

Drama reconstruction

Hostage 911

Lucy Sanders runs Arrow Media's in-house drama reconstruction department, which recreates events for true crime series such as *Married to Evil* and *Secrets of the Hells Angels*. In her spare time, she makes films: last year, she produced the Second World War action movie *Fortunes of War*.

What does your job involve?

Alongside the drama director, I break down a documentary's script to work out what needs dramatising and find suitable locations. The two of us also watch audition tapes together to decide on the actors we're going to use in the reconstructions.

We work closely with the documentary team to match their aspirations with our budgets. I also oversee the drama production team, schedules, logistics, health and safety, and budget.

I can see you are on set now...

I'm in this very glamorous location in Slough – it was an old warehouse, and it is now one of our main shooting locations.

What are you filming at the moment?

A new crime series for a US network. We're recreating suburban America in Slough.

How much drama reconstruction is there in an Arrow Media documentary?

It varies from show to show. Sometimes, there's a lot of found footage that we can use, so we're quite light on drama.

For the episode we're working on today, the reconstruction will probably end up at about 20% of the total length. On others, there's just a sprinkling of drama.

How does reconstruction differ from straight drama?

We're not really filming dramatic scenes – what we're doing is more abstract, trying to give a flavour or feel of what has happened behind closed doors. It adds depth to a documentary. We have to do it sensitively because real people are involved.

We also work very closely with the

documentary and legal team to ensure that everything is factually accurate.

Did you always want to work in television?

I studied Spanish and Italian at university, and I didn't think about TV at all. I was working as a translator and a nanny at the same time, but that wasn't where I wanted my life to go. A one-day runner's job came up at Sky, which sounded fun; they liked me and I didn't leave for four years.

What was the first TV programme you worked on?

I was a production co-ordinator on *Bin There, Dump That*, an observational documentary series about Britain's waste industry. You won't have heard of it – it didn't do very well. My first job as a production manager was on a true crime doc, *Killer Doctors on Death Row*.

Is production management a good route into television?

Absolutely – production is such a key part of making programmes. If you're

organised and love solving problems, it's a great area to work in.

Your role now is far more creative...

That's something I've had to learn – it's been a good challenge for me and I'm really enjoying it.

I also make films in my spare time – I made my first feature last year as a producer, a Second World War action movie, *Fortunes of War*, which is on Prime Video. I'm part of a crew who have worked together on and off for the past 10 years.

We've just finished making a musical short, *Igor Unplugged*, the story of

What do you take on set with you?

A reusable water bottle – no one's allowed on set with a disposable one. It sounds cheesy, but we're shooting such long days that you need to bring positivity with you.

We try to have fun while we're working – every week, we have a lunchtime activity. Last week, we played *Traitors*; this week, we've got a dog show with everyone dressing up as dogs!

What does a day on set look like?

We pride ourselves on not going into overtime – our budgets don't allow

we're able to get a lot of locations out of it. We do a lot of set dressing to match the reference pictures that we have of the real-life events, and we use a lot of camera trickery.

We are forever being asked to film cops knocking on doors; we don't have that many front doors so, over the years, we've found so many ways to film a knock on the door where there is no door.

Bill Thomas used to be a prop-maker, and he worked on huge films such as *Harry Potter* and *Guardians of the Galaxy*, so he's incredibly creative.



Shooting *Married to Evil* with (from left) Lucy Sanders, director Bill Thomas and first assistant director Al Bevan

Frankenstein's downtrodden assistant who longs for a better life. We're submitting it to FrightFest.

You have also worked as a second unit and assistant director at Arrow Media...

Once in a blue moon, when the director is not available, I have stepped in, but it's really not my thing. I think everyone in TV ultimately wants to be a director – except me.

At Arrow Media, with which other people and departments do you work closely?

Arrow's heads of production, Stephanie Mavropoulos and Carrie Pennifer, alongside the series directors and, most of all, Bill Thomas, our show-runner, who directs a lot of the series.

for it. We shoot very efficiently: the production team get here at about 6:00am or 7:00am and we leave by 8:00pm or 9:00pm. We all stay locally and lots of us like to unwind in the pub afterwards.

What are the best and worst parts of the job?

The best is working with such a good team. I wouldn't say there is a "worst part", but the turnaround is always full on. We have one preparation week, then spend two weeks shooting.

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

We try to shoot in a catch-all location. This set in Slough has a manor house attached to it, a lake and fields, so

What do you need to be good at your job?

Flexibility and good organisation.

What advice would you give to someone wanting to work in your area?

University is great, but you don't need to go to do this job. If you do go, don't study television production. Get into the industry, take runner jobs and get as many days on set as you can.

What would you love to work on?

I'd love to make a feature-length musical. I'm musical obsessed. ■

Arrow Media Head of Drama Productions Lucy Sanders was interviewed by Matthew Bell.

Steven Moffat explores what happens when a newscaster makes an off-colour joke. **Shilpa Ganatra** reports

In an era in which Britain's culture wars continue to rage, it takes a brave soul to sideswipe their main tenets on a mile-a-minute TV series. But if ever there were a safe pair of hands, it's those of Steven Moffat OBE.

His ITV comedy drama, densely packed into four 45-minute episodes, embraces many more themes than cancel culture, to which the title, *Douglas Is Cancelled*, alludes. Also highlighted are wokeness, identity politics, mansplaining, slighting, mental health, "micro-bullying" and equality.

Hugh Bonneville, star of such TV gems as *Downton Abbey* and *WIA*, is cast as the eponymous Douglas. He says: "It's like Steven's got a slingshot on a train that's going really fast, and he's firing pebbles at different themes. Sometimes, he dwells on those themes, sometimes he doesn't. But he always hits with deadly accuracy."

The series also stars Karen Gillan (*Selfie*, *Jumanji*), who worked with Moffat when he was the showrunner on *Doctor Who*. She and Bonneville play news anchors on "Live at Six". Douglas Bellows is a national TV treasure, while Madeline Crow is his younger, more dynamic rival. She has Douglas wrapped around her little finger.

Douglas and Madeline's relationship shifts dramatically when he is accused on social media of telling an inappropriate joke at a wedding. As he scrambles to save his reputation, the truth concerning their relationship and the joke is exposed, peeled away one dramatic layer at a time.

The impressive cast also includes Ben Miles (*Coupling*, *The Crown*), Alex Kingston (*ER*, *Doctor Who*), Nick Mohammed (*Ted Lasso*, *Intelligence*) and Simon Russell Beale (*Penny Dreadful*, *The Death of Stalin*), while Madeleine Power (*Six Wives*, *The Last Kingdom*) plays woke teenager Claudia.

Moffat's intention wasn't to lampoon the buzzwords du jour. Rather, it was to examine the dynamics that we



Hugh Bonneville and Karen Gillan in *Douglas Is Cancelled*

Culture wars laid bare

grapple with today. “I was interested in what Sue [Vertue, his wife and the show’s executive producer] calls micro-bullying. Everyone bullies someone and everybody is bullied by somebody. It’s not always in the obvious behind-the-bike-sheds way.

“Office politics are complicated. I witnessed it second-hand [through Vertue], and the difficulties of being a powerful woman in a workplace (and sometimes its advantages) are complicated. So it’s interesting to see what happens when you let characters (in a TV series) attack each other.”

Moffat began working on the series after stepping back as the *Doctor Who* and *Sherlock* show-runner in about 2017 (although he has written a *Doctor Who* episode for the new series). This was before the terms “cancel culture” and “woke” were coined and when the #MeToo movement was beginning to gain traction.

The idea came from a story about “a person who I will not divulge”, Moffat says. “It’s not the main part of the plot, but he was caught misbehaving and thought it might come up in an interview, so he had to have a rehearsal interview with a junior colleague. I was fascinated with the idea of how on earth that would work.”

With this germ of an idea, Moffat developed the script, first as a play, then as a film. “But I was concerned that, as a film, it would never get released because most films like that don’t,” he says. He rewrote it as a four-part series.

Like much of Moffat’s work, *Douglas Is Cancelled* is produced by Hartswood Films, the independent founded by his late mother-in-law, Beryl Vertue, where his wife, Sue Vertue, is a producer and he is Creative Director.

Working so closely with his wife “is not an issue”, says Moffat. “Child rearing is the real work – television is what we do for fun.”

The scripts were received with open arms by ITV. But an American co-producer was less forthcoming, says Vertue. “Everyone was very nervous. No one was putting their hands in their pockets... They’re getting slightly less jittery now, but they have been very jittery for the past 18 months. And very concerned about casting – but, of

course, you don’t cast it properly until you’ve got the money together, so it was a bit chicken and egg.”

Closer to home, BBC Studios became involved as the international distributor, while SkyShowtime came on board as co-producer, which plugged the funding gap.

The all-star cast is bound to have piqued the interest of international broadcasters. Gillan is based in Los Angeles and is making waves in



Hollywood, aided by her high-profile role as Nebula in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

She had read Moffat’s scripts early on and made it “a priority” to return to the UK for the project. “There was no difficulty fitting this in because it’s the most exciting thing that I’ve been involved in for ages,” she says. “I really enjoyed playing a female character that you immediately see as manipulative and ambitious.

“Those words can sometimes have a negative connotation to them. However, if you continue to watch this series, you learn Madeline’s backstory, and you realise that she’s the result of the environment she’s been put into. She’s developed these qualities to survive the workplace.”

Gillan adds: “The story reflects people’s stories within the industry. Things are getting better and headed in the right direction, but there’s still a way to go.”

Reflecting its roots as a play, the series centres around big set pieces, largely two-handers featuring quick-fire verbal volleys. Their intensity – some takes were 10 minutes long – called for a fortnight of rehearsals before filming began. That was an “unusual luxury”, says Moffat, but one that added rigour to these pacy, dramatic moments.

“Sometimes you have rehearsals that turn into a slightly pointless discussion of the script,” he says. “But with this, it meant Ben [Palmer, the director] became very clear on the shots he was taking, and the actors were on top of their material, as you have to be when you have that much of it. All the narrative beats come from the performance, and you need it to be razor sharp.”

Much like in *WIA* and *The Thick of It*, the delivery was so fast-paced that, even though scripts were 60 pages long, they fell short of making 45 minutes of screen time – prompting Moffat to add scenes and characters.

These additions didn’t upset the show’s balance, which expertly offsets moments of light and shade, while respecting the gravity of its darkest topics and satirising others.

Moffat says: “It’s always important to have humour. If the audience laughs, you have said

something to them that they know is true. A joke is just truth at speed – a high-impact insight. So there is no difficulty in marrying comedy to a serious subject.

“In fact, I would argue that’s where comedy belongs. Basil Fawlty was very serious about running that hotel, and we did not see him having a good time. From his point of view, *Fawlty Towers* was a drama series.”

Douglas Is Cancelled is a distinctive, multifaceted series that holds up a mirror to contemporary society, inviting us to re-examine our opinions by playing out the scenarios that happen behind the headlines. But don’t expect easy answers – the crux of the matter lies in its complexity.

Moffat says: “In this show, everyone gets to be right. And everyone gets to be wrong. And there are no heroes.” ■

Douglas Is Cancelled airs from 3 June on **ITVI and ITVX**.

You may not expect a piece in *Television* to begin with East Asian geopolitics, but trust me. Diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea, two pro-American democracies in the region, were strained for a long time due to past wars and economic exploitation. Those tensions were reflected in *Pachinko* (Apple TV+, 2022), a saga about four generations of unhappy Korean emigrants to Japan.

However, in the past two years, the countries have become closer, a rapprochement dramatised in *Eye Love You* (Netflix, 2024), in which a Japanese woman, whose love life is ruined by her mind-reading ability, seduces a South Korean man because the language barrier will prevent her knowing his thoughts. This is the first Japanese show to have a co-lead actor from South Korea, and it has been a success, with appropriate subtitles, in both countries.

The Indo-Pacific love-in of *Eye Love You* could also be seen to symbolise one of the most striking and surprising developments in recent television – the huge cultural and economic power of subtitled TV. The strength of this trend is shown by the international success of *Shōgun* (made by FX and streamed on Disney+), the story of a European sailor who becomes a samurai in the early 17th century. While *Shōgun* is an American-made Japanese-language series, this content revolution began in South Korea.

In 2019, Netflix's Seoul office, an outpost opened the previous year, had a commissioning decision to make. The US streamer had so much cash and content that green lighting was easier than elsewhere. Executives felt able to commit \$21m for a show called 오징어 게임. The modest ambition was to build subscriptions in East Asia.

In the Netflix business model, though, most new content drops everywhere at once. So, from 17 September 2021, this parochial purchase, subtitled *Squid Game*, became the streamer's most watched programme in 94 countries, including the UK.

That global popularity was a tribute to the pan-national appeal of Hwang Dong-hyuk's plot. In the dystopian drama, 456 people with cashflow problems risk death, with the last person standing winning a multi-billion-won prize. The production design of the lethal challenges, – including the orange-smocked doll with the

The writing is on the screen



Shōgun

Disney+'s *Shōgun* has won rave reviews but it was *Squid Game* that sparked the rise and rise of subtitled TV drama, says **Mark Lawson**

rotating-head, who sealed the fate of so many contestants – also helped.

But the greatest significance of *Squid Game* was that it completely contradicted a TV tenet. This held that the tired eyes of busy viewers would no longer read subtitles, except in arthouse cinemas and on niche TV channels,

and then only in mainland Europe.

The Economist reported that in its first 14 days, *Squid Game* had proved 100 times more popular than the average Netflix release. As the magazine also noted, this magnified a recent trend – *Money Heist*, from Spain, and *Dark*, a German series, had matched or

bettered the English-language blockbuster *The Crown*. Yet these ratings contradicted movie data: while *Squid Game* was in pre-production, foreign cinema grossed 2.2% of UK box office and 1.1% in the US – despite 45% and 19%, respectively, of releases being subtitled.

Although it was *Squid Game* that identified this extraordinary transformation, and *Shōgun* that confirmed it, these were the consequences of a longer story played out over the past 20 years, in which the BBC and Channel 4 played a significant part.

During the final two decades of the last century and the first of this, dialogue that viewers had to read rather than hear became controversial. A common complaint in correspondence columns was that subtitles were hard work, required fumbling for spectacles and were impossible to follow when (generally) white text scrolled across snow or clouds.

Even Channel 4, which included in its remit the internationalising of TV, retreated somewhat in the face of these complaints, and the BBC more so. A regular lament of the great *Observer* film critic Philip French (1933–2015) in his later years was that foreign-language movies, a formative influence on him and other post-war British film-goers, had become a rarity on television.

Original TV content, though, was heading the other way. BBC Four, set up in 2002 with an emphasis more on culture than ratings, deliberately shopped overseas. This was partly thrift – not many networks were competing for these pieces – but it brought glorious imports. These included a police series from France, *Spiral* (shown in the UK from 2006), and two Danish shows: crime drama *The Killing* (aired in the UK from 2011) and *Borgen* (shown in the UK from 2012), which can plausibly claim to be a Nordic political equivalent to *The West Wing*.

Confirming the fourth BBC channel's frequent fate of having good ideas for other people, the fourth series of *The Bridge*, a Swedish-Danish cop show, was promoted to BBC Two in 2018; emblematically, *The Killing* and *Borgen* can now be found not on BBC iPlayer but on Disney+ and Netflix, respectively.

Channel 4 again began to trust viewers to find their glasses with the launch, in 2016, of the hugely influential *Walter Presents* brand. It used

selected network episodes to nudge viewers to the streaming service on which Walter Iuzzolino, an omniscient Italian TV producer, curated choice examples of world television.

Several of his early hits were Scandi crime stories, and the increasing receptiveness of UK viewers to these read-and-see pieces surely reflected the bestselling success of so-called Scandi noir crime novels by Henning Mankell, Camilla Läckberg and Jo Nesbø. The books were in translation, but seem to have encouraged TV audiences to taste them neat.



Tellingly, some viewers preferred the subtitled Swedish adaptations of Mankell's *Wallander* books on BBC Four to the Kenneth Branagh-led English language versions on BBC One.

Another boon for foreign-language content was that DVDs and then streamers employed technologies that encouraged more efficient subtitles; some UK and US viewers even made use of the English closed captioning (designed to help those who can't hear the audio) for strongly idiomatic shows such as *The Wire* and *The Sopranos*.

But if those developments made viewers more accepting of reading dialogue on screen, the biggest driver of subtitling has been a growing sensitivity to cultural appropriation and offence. Where it was once standard for Germans or other foreign nationals in UK and US dramas to speak accented English, this is now rightly seen as offensive or colonial.

The logical next step from the trend in English shows for French, Italian,

Indian, Arab and other characters to have their language captioned when addressing a fellow national is that shows from those cultures should be entirely subtitled.

Shōgun is a prime example. James Clavell's 1975 novel was first televised in a 1980 NBC mini-series. While featuring many Japanese actors and some of their native language, it also required them to speak English (learned phonetically and apparently over-dubbed if judged inaccurate). The cast included the Hertfordshire-born Michael Hordern as a Spanish priest.

Disney may have worried about the ratings consequences for its *Shōgun* of not being able to appease the English-speaking market in that way. But, post-*Squid Game*, it doesn't matter.

The trend is not constant. Netflix's real-life (but not real-death) gameshow spin-off, *Squid Game: The Challenge*, which won the Entertainment category at this year's RTS Programme Awards, is UK-made and English-spoken. The Netflix revenge drama *Beef*, shortlisted in the International category at the same ceremony has a Korean-American showrunner, Lee Sung Jin, and East Asian central characters but the dialogue is American English.

That is partly because the story is set in the US, but what is remarkable – and would have seemed impossible until very recently – is that, if *Squid Game: The Challenge* and *Beef* had been subtitled, they might still have been international hits. In a good way, the writing, for a once seemingly dying convention, is on the screen. ■



The Rest Is Entertainment:
Richard Osman and Marina Hyde

Goalhanger

A feast for our ears

Which are your go-to podcasts? The chances are that at least one is on media and entertainment. According to Ofcom's latest survey, it is the number-one genre, at least for the under-50s, and the choice is ever widening.

In less than a year, *The Rest Is Entertainment*, *Off the Telly* and a new, hour-long version of Radio 4's *The Media Show* have come along, plus several others, including *Media Confidential*, and *When It Hits the Fan*.

"It's because media people love talking about media," says Matt Deegan, presenter of the long-running *The Media Podcast*. "And everyone has an opinion on the media because they consume it."

Tom Nicholson, of the website *Pod Bible*, says: "It's very hard to get your podcast noticed if it doesn't have

From *Off the Telly* to *The Rest Is Entertainment*, media podcasts are booming. **Simon Bucks** can't stop listening

celebrities attached. So, it's natural that there will be a lot of media and entertainment podcasts. It's a crowded landscape."

Rhian Roberts, BBC Commissioning Editor, Podcasts, Formats and Digital, says: "I think it's because the audience has got more choice. If you're like me, you want to know how to choose what to do with your time."

Roberts is the brains behind *Off the Telly*, a sort of fast-talking audio *Gogglebox* fronted by two well-known TV

faces: *EastEnders* actor Natalie Cassidy and *Gavin & Stacey*'s Joanna Page. The pair's standard introduction is: "Please remember that there might be some spoilers in this because we are talking about telly that we've been watching over the week. And there could be a little bit of swearing."

That's pretty much it: two friends having an uncensored quick-fire natter, mostly about telly, and a bit about life.

"I was thinking about what we can do for the audience that watches TV in a way that isn't necessarily the way that a critic would watch," explains Roberts. "We're watching TV because we want to be cheered up or made happy, or because the routine of it is a comfort to us."

At Gary Lineker's outfit, Goalhanger, which bills itself as the UK's largest independent podcast company, co-founder Tony Pastor is quietly celebrating *The Rest Is Entertainment*, the



The Media Show:
Ros Atkins and
Katie Razzall

BBC

the global view, to look at the tech giants and the way they are affecting our democracy, because that's an area we have under-explored before. Then, of course, there's the rise of the entertainment side, streamers, podcasting and all that. So, you've had this huge explosion over the past decade, and I felt that was absolutely worth an hour."

Bakaya resists the suggestion that it is just an economy measure for a cash-strapped station: "You could say that, but most podcasts are an hour, some are two hours.

"This is simply about trying to give listeners more of what they should have in the areas where I think it matters most. And anyway, we've given it more resource."

Although Razzall and Atkins' new, double-length show has its lighter moments – including segments on *Gladiators* and the "joy of Saturday night television" – Bakaya agrees that those are not its focus: "Broadly, it's there to look at the serious side of the media and the way it interplays with the public."

Snapping at *The Media Show's* heavy-weight heels are two independent podcasts, *Media Confidential*, presented by former rival editors Alan Rusbridger (*The Guardian*) and Lionel Barber (*Financial Times*), which began last September, and *Beeb Watch*, launched in 2022 and fronted by Roger Bolton, veteran TV executive and defenestrated presenter of *Feedback*.

Rusbridger, now Editor of *Prospect* magazine, says: "We start from the assumption that media is an important force in society and you should examine it just as you would any other. I don't think that's necessarily a

shared assumption among all people in the media. When we ran *Media Guardian*, other media companies were outraged if we looked at them as you would a bank or a car manufacturer; it was somehow letting the side down."

Podcasters tend to be cagey about listener numbers but, with low production costs, you don't need many to turn a profit. At 5,000, Rusbridger says, *Media Confidential* breaks even. However, the underlying business rationale is to promote the magazine, especially ▶

fastest growing addition to the "*The Rest Is...*" pod franchise. It is presented by Richard Osman and Marina Hyde, both of whom will be appearing at the RTS London Convention in September.

"We felt there was a fascination in the burgeoning world of media and entertainment," says Pastor. "We wanted to be quite broad, to talk about what's being released on Netflix, the state of the British newspaper industry, what the best books coming out are."

Pastor is inspired by the scale and quality of media podcasting in the US. "America is more advanced than us. It's got a very sophisticated conversation going on about the media world, particularly about the entertainment industry, which isn't really happening in the UK."

The Rest Is Entertainment is just over six months old, but has already reached 2 million monthly downloads and, says Pastor, the audience is growing by something like 10% a week. Moreover, the gender split is roughly even, a key ambition for Goalhanger, whose other *The Rest Is...* podcasts on history, politics, money and football skew heavily male.

Osman and Hyde, both TV experts, lift the lid on industry secrets – from

the power of agents to how panel show scoring works and the key to acting like a convincing corpse. But they are equally ready to dissect the business and political side of media: recent episodes have focused on the Disney board battle, Hugh Grant's phone-hacking settlement with *The Sun* and how the habits of TV viewers align with their voting intentions.

This is turf traditionally occupied by the more industry-targeted *The Media Show* on BBC Radio 4, now extended to an hour, with two-headed presentation by Katie Razzall and Ros Atkins.

"It's about democracy," says Mohit Bakaya, Controller of BBC Radio 4. "I doubled the length because I felt it was important to dig into how people are getting their information and how they can begin to pick between truth and disinformation.

"We asked the team to do more on

**'IT IS A
COMPETITIVE
MARKET, [DON'T]
UNDERESTIMATE
HOW CROWDED
IT IS'**



Off the Telly:
Natalie Cassidy
and Joanna Page

BBC

► to under-35s who, according to Ofcom, are the biggest podcast fans. “*Prospect* has been traditionally older ABC1 men, whom we love, but it would be nice to have ABC1 women and younger ABC1 men, too.”

As the name suggests, *Beeb Watch* is mainly, though not exclusively, a vehicle for Bolton to hold his former employer’s feet to the fire. “With the BBC Charter coming up [for renewal] in 2027, with the licence fee under intense pressure, with the media landscape changing, I was keen to get a debate going,” he says. “Is there a role for public service media? What is it? What is the best way of delivering it? How should we pay for it?”

Bolton thinks that increased media literacy lies behind the upsurge of podcasts about the industry, but concedes that part of his own motivation is ego. Does the show cut through? So far, yes, he says, it’s reaching about 2,000 listeners – more for a hot topic – and, yes, a nice irony, his BBC pension helps to subsidise it.

‘THE REST IS ENTERTAINMENT [AUDIENCE] IS GROWING BY SOMETHING LIKE 10% A WEEK’

For *Goalhanger*, on the other hand, podcasting means serious money. It has now overtaken its original video business, with big-name advertisers and sponsors such as Disney, ITVX and Sky vying for spots.

“It’s become the absolute centre-piece of our world,” says Pastor. The big attraction is simplicity. “Getting a TV commission is difficult, because there are lots of people trying to persuade commissioners they should part with their budgets. If we have an idea for a show, we meet Richard Osman for lunch, we ring up Marina

Hyde. And, two weeks later, we’re piloting and, two weeks after that, we’re producing it and it’s out.”

The profits are split three ways, between the two presenters and *Goalhanger*. “We operate pretty much like a collective; they’re in it with us, and we build the show together.”

Goalhanger may have found a goldmine, but don’t expect a general bonanza, warns James Cridland, Editor of *podnews.net*. Although UK podcasting is vibrant, he says it performs worse on ad revenue than you might expect because the BBC’s ad-free output constitutes half the market. UK pod revenue is projected to reach £54m in 2024, a fraction of the \$3.2bn (£2.6bn) in the US, according to Statista.

“The BBC is a big disruptor,” says Cridland. “That’s why the commercial industry is a bit nervous about the announcement that, possibly by the end of next year, the BBC’s UK podcasts on third-party platforms – though not BBC Sounds – will contain advertising.”

By the time you read this, the *Beeb’s Off the Telly* will be appearing twice a week, with the second show featuring voice-note messages from listeners revealing their “comfort watches”. That sounds like a measure of success but Roberts isn’t revealing listener numbers yet, not even to the presenters.

“They are as good as I would expect at this point. You have to build an audience. It’s a competitive market, no one should underestimate how crowded it is. We’ll talk numbers when we get to millions,” she says.

What’s next? *Goalhanger* has successfully pioneered podcast live shows with *The Rest is Politics* combo of Alastair Campbell and Rory Stewart, to which Pastor is adding two *The Rest is History* live events in June.

“I think Richard and Marina would definitely work as a live show,” says Pastor. “Richard is a wonderful host and Marina sells out ticketed events for *The Guardian* all the time. The only restriction is their availability.”

Roberts also likes the idea of *Off the Telly* live shows, one day. For now, she is deep into American podcasts – “not to steal but to see if I can pick up any hints and tips”. Among her favourites is *How Did This Get Made?* – billed as a “comedy podcast that celebrates bad movies”. You saw it here first. ■

OUR FRIEND IN THE EAST



Chiara Di Filippo discusses the region's future with RTS East Vice-Chair Charlie Gauvain

The East of England's TV industry faces unique challenges and opportunities. I sat down with Charlie Gauvain, Managing Director of Eye Film in Norwich and Vice-Chair of RTS East, to discuss these dynamics and shed light on the region's achievements and the hurdles it must overcome.

The East of England has seen less commissioning activity than areas such as the North East and South West. The situation is particularly dire this year. "There's a lot less commissioning than there's ever been," says Gauvain.

Despite housing some of the UK's largest film production units, including Warner Bros Studios Leavesden in Hertfordshire, the region suffers from a lack of locally commissioned projects. "Production companies come from outside the region, they make their programmes and they disappear again," Gauvain laments, illustrating a cycle that deprives local companies of opportunities to grow.

The difficulties extend beyond broadcast work. According to Gauvain, the past 12 months have been particularly challenging for Eye Film: "I can't remember another time when we've struggled so much... it seems almost like the downturn is much worse than it was last year when everyone was talking about it."

This downturn has hit various sectors, including schools and educational projects, which exacerbates the

financial strain on local production companies. "There are a lot of companies going out of business," says Gauvain. "Business has its highs and lows, and right now it feels like a real low – I hope companies can ride it out, but I think there are going to be quite a few casualties along the way."

In the face of these challenges, Gauvain stresses the importance of collaboration within the industry. "Now more than ever, we need to join forces, we need to get together and prove that we can work with each other," he urges.

While recent RTS East events, such as "Norwich Film People" and "Cambridge Film People", have sparked conversations and created new connections among TV professionals, Gauvain believes there is a need to transform these dialogues into

concrete projects and commissions.

Nurturing new talent and increasing access to the TV industry is crucial. The RTS East Student Television Awards are a great opportunity for this. Gauvain recalls that he employed Jack Bernardin, a graduate of City College Norwich, after seeing his film *Hip Hop*, winner of the Editing award, at the 2024 awards ceremony in March.

Bernardin is now working as an editor at Eye Film and is nominated alongside his colleagues for his work on *Town Close and Ansible Motion – Driver in the Loop* at this month's RTS East Programme Awards.

Looking ahead, RTS East remains optimistic. Norfolk Screen has recently been awarded Film Office status by Norfolk County Council. Factual drama *The Sixth Commandment* – co-produced by Cambridge-based True Vision East TV – won three awards at the RTS Programme Awards.

RTS East is gearing up to host its annual Programme Awards, which have received a record number of submissions.

"We are looking forward to hosting our largest Programme Awards yet, thanks to a large number of entries and first-time nominees and the generous support from Anglia Ruskin University," says Gauvain. "We aim to continue nurturing the next generation of young film and TV talent and make our region an exciting hub for the industry." ■

Chiara Di Filippo is RTS East Event Manager.



Amina is a punk rocker

We Are Lady Parts

Channel 4

We Are Lady Parts was an oasis of TV joy amid the bleakness of the pandemic as Nida Manzoor's exuberant comedy about an all-female Muslim punk band brought laughs and great tunes to Channel 4. Now, three years later to the month, the RTS- and Bafta-award winning show returns for a second series, "bolder, sillier, darker and deeper" than before, in Manzoor's words.

Series 1 – greenlit on the back of an irreverent short for Channel 4's *Comedy Blaps* – "was a trial by fire, but I found my voice, my style and my confidence in creating this show", recalls the creator, writer, director and executive

We Are Lady Parts returns to Channel 4 – bigger and bolder. Matthew Bell is hooked

producer. "Most importantly, I found my tribe – from actors and crew to producers and studio execs."

Manzoor says she "felt emboldened" to go "bigger and bolder... and push it further. I felt a sense of confidence having made season 1 and having made a film as well in between."

This film was her highly regarded debut feature *Polite Society*, a martial arts action comedy, which Manzoor wrote and directed. "A spinning

back-kick of laughs," reckoned *The Guardian* critic Peter Bradshaw.

Making *Polite Society*, says Manzoor, boosted her confidence: "You make a film and... slowly, the imposter syndrome wears down a bit. So, for season 2... it means you can... lean into pushing the story, pushing the characters, being more ambitious."

Manzoor admits to an initial "fear of [not] topping season 1, but then I just got back into the characters and their world... I had such an incredible writers room of Muslim women from different backgrounds. So many of the themes and conversations we had in that safe space were so inspiring."

For series 2, the band is back in full – Anjana Vasan's nice-as-pie lead guitarist Amina, Sarah Kameela

Impey's spiky singer Saira, Juliette Motamed's sarky drummer Ayesha and Faith Omole as chilled bass player Bisma – as is Lucie Shorthouse, the wheeler-dealer manager, Momtaz, who has to keep the show on the road.

As yet, no musical differences, rampant egoism or rock excess have disturbed the band's equilibrium. They are, however, broke, despite a summer of gigging, and may have to compromise their beliefs to raise money to make their first record. There is also competition from a new outfit, *Second Wife*, who are enjoying success with a cover (theft or homage?) of the Lady Parts' song *Bashir with the Good Beard*.

As with series 1, the show mixes clever pastiche punk written by Manzoor and her siblings, and covers, all played by the band.

"The new songs were really, really hard to play," says Motamed, but there was compensation in the extra band practice. "It was just so nice having the time with the girls; it's such a rare thing in this industry to be able to have a couple of uninterrupted weeks of just being in the room together."

Shorthouse adds: "They do all of it... [it's not] TV magic and stuff being manipulated. They are a full-on band!"

One of the covers is *Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood*, most famously sung by Nina Simone, and performed by Bisma in the new series. "I've always loved [Nina Simone] from a very young age," says Omole. "I got a bit teary. I just wanted to do it justice.... It came from the heart, you know – it was one of those things where five-year-old me showed up on set that day."

We Are Lady Parts doesn't take any prisoners; one of the band's songs is the provocatively titled *Ain't No One Gonna Honour Kill My Sister But Me*.

And it was not the programme telly chiefs wanted Manzoor to make earlier in her career. She recalls: "I was being asked to write about Muslim women as traumatised or as victims. I think that experience really pushed me to develop and create *We Are Lady Parts*.

"As people of colour, sometimes you feel this burden to always do more, sometimes at the expense of your own self.... Growing up, I never got to see myself on the screen, so making the show has always fed my soul in a really meaningful way – every day on set seeing this cast playing punk music and being funny..."

"Muslim women's representation is just so narrow and just showing these women as funny for me was a big thing."

Motamed adds: "The issue with representation is when it becomes tokenistic.... Making the show, that's not the feeling that you have on set."

For Omole, it was more important that the scripts were about "real people" and "based in humanity", rather than simply representing an

thing, it's an incredibly positive thing"

The new series also features a couple of surprising cameos: one is from renowned education activist Malala Yousafzai, who survived an assassination attempt by a Taliban gunman; the other is by comedy legend Meera Syal, the co-creator and star of *Goodness Gracious Me*, who plays an ageing punk.

"Meera has been an inspiration for me as an artist; she is someone who showed me that I can make comedy.



We Are Lady Parts

Channel 4

idea of Muslim women. "We could all connect with them because... they're real, individual people and that, for me as an artist, is what is really refreshing."

Vasan adds: "I've been so grey in so many different TV shows I've done and this is filled with so much love and care.... It's empowered me to be able to turn down jobs, because I've gone: 'Well, I can't do that now after doing *We Are Lady Parts*.' That's not a negative

The work she's done is subversive, cool," says Manzoor.

Recalling the shoot, Syal says it was the "most joyful and the most diverse set I've ever been on and I don't think it is an accident that the two go together". All sets should be "a safe space", she adds, so you don't "have all your defences up and can produce beautiful work like this. These women are fucking amazing..."

"I was so honoured to be part of it – [they] are changing the landscape and I'm so proud to be part of that." ■

'SHOWING THESE WOMEN AS FUNNY WAS A BIG THING'

We Are Lady Parts is produced by Working Title Television, which is part of Universal International Studios, for Channel 4 in the UK and Peacock in the US. Series 2 began in both countries on 30 May.

Game on! Our great summer of sport



Match point at the Wimbledon Men's Final 2023

BBC

Television sport is big business, from the sums broadcasters pay for rights, to the audiences and advertising revenue it generates and the eye-watering salaries

of its stars.

At the end of last month in Saudi Arabia, depending on broadcaster DAZN's pay-per-view receipts, Tyson Fury could have pocketed more than £100m from his heavyweight unification fight against Ukraine's Oleksandr Usyk. And he lost.

Cristiano Ronaldo – remember him? – earned \$200m this season from his contract with Al-Nassr in the Saudi Pro League, according to Forbes, and \$60m more in commercial endorsements. Forbes' top 50 sporting earners, all of whom trousered \$45m-plus, are from NBA basketball and NFL football in the US, but also from the worlds of football, golf, motor racing and tennis.

Over the coming months, many of these moneyed stars will be key players in TV's great summer of sport – at the Euros, Wimbledon, The Open and the

The Euros and the Paris Olympics take centre stage, but almost every sport gets a look in. **Matthew Bell can't wait**

British Grand Prix. The ICC Men's T20 Cricket World Cup, the Tour de France cycling and, of course, the Paris Olympic Games and Paralympics, complete the sporting jamboree (see box, right).

The summer offers an opportunity for the UK's traditional broadcasters – the BBC, ITV and Channel 4 – to hog the limelight, now that the club football season, where Sky and TNT Sport hold sway, has ended.

Wimbledon, the Euros, the Olympics and the Paralympics are all so-called “crown jewels of sport” and must be broadcast live on free-to-air TV. T20 World Cup cricket and The Open from Royal Troon are the only major events this summer where live coverage

occurs exclusively behind a pay wall; in this case, Sky's. Eurosport is broadcasting from both the Olympics and the Tour de France, but the BBC and ITV, respectively, offer free alternatives.

According to Barb, the three most-watched sport events last year were: England's defeat at the hands of Spain in the Women's World Cup final (7.2 million viewers); Carlos Alcaraz's first Wimbledon title (6.9 million); and England vs South Africa in the Rugby Union World Cup (5.6 million).

A closer look at Wimbledon viewing demonstrates the pull of live sport. The BBC's coverage of Alcaraz's five-set win over seven-time champion Novak Djokovic peaked at 11.3 million, a huge audience share of 66%. And, across the tournament, 25.6 million people tuned into the BBC.

Thanks to the Men's Euros, with England and Scotland involved, TV audiences for sport will be even higher this year. The Olympics will help, too.

Linear audiences may be in long-term decline – 51.9 million tuned into London 2012 on the BBC, compared

with 45.2 million for Rio in 2016 and 36.4 million for Tokyo – but streaming is taking up the slack. BBC Sport's Tokyo 2020 coverage had a record-breaking 104 million requests to watch online.

Broadcasting Wimbledon, the Olympics and the Euros – the latter with ITV – allows the BBC to burnish its public service credentials.

The Paralympics does the same for Channel 4, which has covered the games since London 2012. One media analyst says: “The channel loses money on it; it is quite open about that. But you have to remember that it is constantly under scrutiny for its public service broadcasting credentials. The Paralympics gives Channel 4 a good story to tell.”

Sport is a consistent banker for broadcasters, given that linear ratings for other genres are in decline. New figures from Enders Analysis reveal that, since 2015, sport viewing decreased by just 3% while other genres fell 26%. Football is becoming ever more dominant (see charts opposite).

“Overall, sport is almost as popular on TV as it was in 2015 – that’s saying something when you think about overall viewing decline. Every other genre is down. And the vast majority of sport is watched live, which makes it so valuable for advertisers,” says Tom Harrington, Head of Television at Enders Analysis.

A lot has been written about younger viewers lacking the attention span to watch sport live and opting for clips or, at best, highlights, often on social media. And it is true that under-35s watch far less TV, but the decline is less pronounced in sport. “While live sport is down a little bit for young people, it’s much more resilient than other genres,” says Harrington.

For the commercial broadcasters, bums on sofas matter. ITV has forecast a much-needed 12% jump in its ad revenue, largely due to the Euros, from the first quarter of this year. The further into the tournament England (and, to a lesser extent, Scotland) progress, the better. Four years ago, the England vs Denmark semi-final reached almost 24 million viewers on ITV.

With ITV running the latest series of *Love Island* at the same time as the Euros, it is hoping to corner the ad market. And don't forget the Tour de France on ITV4, which attracts the advertisers' favourite demographic – Lycra-clad road warriors, aka ageing blokes with more money than sense. ■

A summer of sport – what's on TV

■ Less the gentle sound of leather on willow, more the thwack of a ball being launched into orbit, the **ICC Men's T20 World Cup** in the US and West Indies opens the great summer of sport on 2 June. The slug-fest, live on Sky Sports, concludes on 29 June with Barbados hosting the final.

■ **Euro 2024** kicks off in Munich on 14 June with a group match between host nation Germany and Scotland – who have never got beyond the group stages – and ending with the final in Berlin on 14 July. Hungary and Switzerland complete Group A; England are in Group C with Denmark, Serbia and Slovenia. The BBC and ITV/STV share UK broadcast rights.



2022 and 2023 Tour de France winner Jonas Vingegaard

Creative Commons 2.0 Filip Bossyut

■ The Grand Départ of the **Tour de France** finds cycling's premier event in Florence on 29 June at the start of three and a half days' lucrative racing in Italy, before the riders return to familiar French

terrain. Catch the action on Eurosport and ITV4. The tour climaxes with a time trial to Nice on 21 July; the usual Champs-Élysées finish in Paris was kiboshed by Olympic Games preparations.

■ Anyone for tennis? The BBC, as it has since 1927 (radio) and 1937 (TV), brings **Wimbledon** to the masses (though ITV did cover it during the 1950s and 1960s with tennis and style icon Fred Perry commentating) from 1 to 14 July.

■ Formula 1's **British Grand Prix** on 7 July is broadcast live on Sky and Channel 4, where, pedal to the metal, Lewis Hamilton will be chasing his ninth victory at Silverstone. New Brit kid on the block, Lando Norris, fresh from his first F1 win, at the Miami Grand Prix, will vie for the crowd's affections.

■ Sky brings **The Open** from Royal Troon to 19th holes and living rooms from 18 to 21 July; highlights are on the BBC.

■ Football and Rugby Sevens kick off the **Paris Olympics** on 24 July, two days before the opening ceremony. There are 329 medal events – including Breaking (breakdancing, come on you squares) and skateboarding as the games, which run to 11 August, get down with the kids. The BBC and Eurosport do the broadcasting honours, with top gig going to the surfing commentators and crews slumming it in Tahiti.

■ **The Paralympics** run from 28 August to 8 September, with Channel 4 providing the coverage.

Change in total broadcaster viewing: Sport vs the rest of TV, 2015 to 2023

All viewers	Under-35s
Sport: -3%	Sport -23%
Rest of TV -26%	Rest of TV -62%

Sport as a proportion of all live TV viewing, 2015 to 2023

All viewers	Under-35s
2015 8%	2015 7%
2023 12%	2023 17%

Football as a proportion of all sports viewing, 2015 to 2023

All viewers	Under-35s
2015 36%	2015 42%
2023 41%	2023 49%

Change in total viewing, 2015 to 2023

All viewers	Under-35s
Football +19%	Rugby -16%
Cricket* +48%	Formula 1 0%

*Cricket was boosted by the launch of The Hundred and some T20 internationals on the BBC.

Source: Enders Analysis

If Keir Starmer's triumphs at the polls on 4 July, Thangam Debbonaire is set to become the Labour Party's first Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport in 14 years..

No one who works in broadcasting needs any reminding that the 14 years of Conservative administrations have seen no fewer than 12 culture secretaries, ranging from the first and longest serving, Jeremy Hunt, who held the post for two years, to the present minister, Lucy Frazer, whose willingness to engage with the creative industries has won her admirers across the sector.

Debbonaire was asked last October if she would commit to spending a full parliamentary term at DCMS. Her reply was unequivocal: "I'm intending to be in this job for the long haul. That's Keir's plan. And that's my plan."

So, as the election campaign gains momentum, who is Thangam Debbonaire? In recent months, as MP for Bristol West she studiously played her part in Labour's carefully calibrated charm offensive directed at the movers and shakers in the arts and media.

The Labour Party said, at its Creatives Conference on 14 March, that it aimed to make the creative industries central to a decade of national renewal and a key driver of economic growth. Clearly, this is easier said than done, having eluded five successive Conservative PMs as Brexit, Covid and war in Ukraine rocked their administrations.

One of Debbonaire's mantras is that the UK's public service broadcasters create "wealth, jobs and joy". This is not the kind of sentiment you expect to hear from a Conservative government who many hold responsible for leaving the BBC with no choice other than to make big cuts at a time of rampant inflation.

So, how does she see the role of culture secretary at this difficult time? To quote TV presenter turned diversity campaigner Floella Benjamin, the TV industry "is in turmoil, facing new technology, cuts and unemployment, so government must provide creative survival solutions as we navigate this rapidly changing landscape".

In the past, Debbonaire has described herself as "a northern European socialist – a democratic socialist"



Ode to joy

Steve Clarke profiles **Thangam Debbonaire**, the cello-playing shadow culture secretary who believes in the power of music to change lives

Thangam Debbonaire

who supports “fettered capitalism”.

Many culture secretaries are Oxbridge-educated lawyers, but she breaks the mould. Unusually, for a senior politician, Debbonaire’s background encompasses working in the arts as a performer. “I believe in culture, not culture wars,” she likes to say.

“Thangam is very sincere,” opined Pact CEO John McVay, who attended the Labour event in March. “She’s from the creative economy and I think she has a real passion for it.”

The shadow culture secretary is a former professional cellist, who learnt to play aged four; she went on to play with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. She still plays in a Parliamentary string quartet, the Statutory Instruments.

Both her parents were music lovers; her father came to England on a one-way ticket from India and met her English mother at the Royal Academy of Music. When she was invited by Starmer last year to become shadow culture secretary, she is reported to have literally danced for joy.

She attended two private schools, Bradford Girls’ Grammar School and Chetham’s School of Music. Debbonaire left Oxford – where she read maths – before graduating. While at Oxford, she also attended the Royal College of Music.

Her education continued at Bristol University, where she gained a post-graduate degree in management, development and social responsibility. In her twenties, she changed her name by deed poll from Singh to Debbonaire, the name borrowed from a relative from her first marriage.

Aside from music, much of her career before being elected as an MP in 2015 involved organisations dedicated to child protection and helping women who had suffered from abusive relationships. She has co-written two books on domestic violence.

Debbonaire is married to the performer Kevin Walton, who trained at the National Youth Theatre. He is a director of Ark Stichting, a Dutch charity that assists children with special educational needs. In 2017, Debbonaire held what is believed to be the UK’s first constituency surgery for people on the autism spectrum.

Asked about her own cultural life, Debbonaire told *Television* that she is a huge admirer of the BBC. She enjoys Radio 3 and approves of the changes that the newish Controller Sam Jackson has introduced, including such innovations as bringing a Northern Soul night to the Proms and introducing regional concerts.

“Why shouldn’t Jools Holland be on Radio 3?” she said. “Radio 3 should be

‘THE UK’S PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTERS CREATE WEALTH, JOBS AND JOY’

accessible to everyone, not only traditionalists like me. We need gateways to classical music.” She is a regular listener to Classic FM and BBC Radio 4, and starts her day with *Today*.

Her viewing choices include *Happy Valley* (“Nostalgia city for me,” having grown up in Hebden Bridge), *Shetland*, *Ted Lasso*, *Slow Horses* – and, no surprise here, *Mr Bates vs the Post Office*, which she said was “humbling for us politicians. It showed the power of storytelling to bring about change.”

She may be into Tchaikovsky but she is also a big Talking Heads fan. “It was literally the first piece of vinyl I ever bought. Actually, the albums *Remain in Light* and *Fear of Music* remain my two favourite complete works of music – apart from Schubert,” she told the *New Statesman* in 2021.

During treatment for breast cancer shortly after she was first elected an MP, Debbonaire said that listening to classical music aided her recovery.

As to the key question of long-term BBC funding should Labour win on 4 July, she said she would “look at all the available options” for post-2027, when the BBC charter is renewed.

“I love the BBC. I think it’s an amazing institution. If we didn’t have the BBC and the public service broadcast sector, we’d want to invent it,” she said. “It’s the biggest commissioner of the creative industries and hugely impor-

tant in terms of Britain’s soft power.

“Of course, we want it to continue as a universally funded public service broadcaster, but we need the funding to be sustainable.

“We know that several hundred thousand fewer people pay the licence fee now than did several years ago and that successive Tory governments have made the BBC’s finances increasingly pressured.

“So, we’re going to have to look at all the available options. However, we’re committed to maintaining the licence fee over the current Charter period.

“We know that there are challenges, but I don’t want a two-tier system. I want a system that maintains the free-to-air approach. I know that lots of ideas about future BBC funding have been chucked around, such as advertising. That would decimate the rest of the PSB sector that is already struggling with declining advertising revenues.”

If Labour wins the election, she aims to secure better working terms for freelancers, and introduce rules to ensure they are paid promptly.

Many political commentators believe that the biggest challenge of all, should Labour triumph at the polls on 4 July, is fostering an environment in which economic growth is the default setting for the British economy.

“A Labour government will need growth in the economy,” said McVay. “We’re a high-growth sector, so what she can do to help us grow more is not only good for us, it’s good for the country. I’ve spoken to her about that, and she gets it.”

He added: “The Secretary of State’s job is to corral governments. Their job is to say: ‘There’s an opportunity here or there’s a problem. This is serious and important for the country. I’m going to do what I can to get that over the line.’

“Successful ministers are the ones who can do that. If Labour is elected, I sincerely hope that Thangam has that ability, because that’s what we want.”

And, in case you wondered, *Thangam* is Hindi for “golden; full of joy; precious”. If the July election goes Starmer’s way, his culture secretary may have an opportunity to live up to her name. ■

Heartbreak, magic and fairy dust



Lost Boys & Fairies leads Sion Daniel Young (left) and Fra Fee

BBC

For series creator Daf James, *Lost Boys & Fairies* is a “coming-of-middle-age story”. Set in Cardiff, the bilingual English and Welsh drama follows Gabriel and Andy, played by Sion Daniel Young (known from *Deceit*) and Fra Fee (*Hawkeye*), on their journey to adopt their first child.

Gabriel is an artist and “performer-extraordinaire” at a queer cabaret club called Neverland. Like Peter Pan, he has never really grown up. Andy, an accountant, is a picture of stability and middle-aged domesticity.

At once hilarious and heartbreaking, *Lost Boys & Fairies* draws on James and his husband’s own adoption experience. They have adopted three children, two boys and a girl. It is a show about families – the ones you are born with

Daf James’s bilingual queer adoption tale puts the ‘drag’ in the Welsh dragon for BBC One.
By **Caitlin Danaher**

and the ones you choose. “It’s rooted in the personal for me, psychologically and emotionally,” says James. “I’m a fairy and a lost boy simultaneously.”

Tired of seeing social workers portrayed as antagonists on screen, in *Lost Boys* James writes Jackie, played by Elizabeth Berrington (*The Pact*), as the hero of Gabriel and Andy’s story. She’s the humorous heart of the show, lightening emotionally fraught moments

with a disarming quip or cheeky comment. As she says: “I’m a social worker, boys, not a priest!”

Lost Boys & Fairies began as part of BBC’s TV Drama Writers’ Programme, now known as Pilot, in 2019. The initiative paired James with Leeds-based production company Duck Soup Films; the series marks James’s first original screenplay for the BBC and Duck Soup’s first commission.

For Duck Soup founders Bekki Wray-Rogers, Libby Durdy and Jessica Brown Meek, it was the perfect first independent project. They had previously worked together on *This Is England ’86* and *Utopia*, and this drama ticked all their boxes of championing an authentic new voice while conveying a powerful message.

The journey from script to screen was long and arduous. The pilot came

close to a green light at the end of 2019, garnering praise from BBC TV's then Head of Drama, Piers Wenger, and BBC One Controller Charlotte Moore. But Covid derailed the project.

Lost Boys & Fairies was eventually commissioned in 2021, with the stipulation that it would not start shooting until 2023. For a new indie, the conditions could not have been tougher, but the extended gestation period allowed James and the Duck Soup team to expand the pilot into a three-part mini-series.

"It meant we were really well prepared," Meek says. "The scripts were in fantastic shape before we even started prep, which is obviously the ideal."

James arrives as an exciting new voice in TV, and there are similarities with his fellow countryman Russell T Davies. Both masterfully balance dark and light subject matter with whip-smart humour. James says: "If you can make your audience laugh, you can disarm them and take them on these journeys and, hopefully, plummet into emotional depths with them as well."

Though the show is full of emotional truth, James insists that *Lost Boys & Fairies* is not a "true story" per se. Characters such as Gabriel's difficult father, Emrys, his partner, Andy, or the young boy the couple hope to adopt, Jake, are all "works of fiction".

"Daf writes with an emotional journey at the forefront of his mind," says Young, who plays Gabriel. "He is so bang-on with all of those emotional beats."

Bursting with songs and colourful costumes, the series is a visual delight, with James also acting as music director. But this is no saccharine high-school musical. Flashbacks to Gabriel's early years show his troubled upbringing at the hands of a strict religious father, while the Thatcher Government's Section 28 – which prohibited the promotion of homosexuality – sets the political agenda and the family watch terrifying adverts on TV warning of Aids.

Gabriel's repressed sexuality manifests in dangerous ways. His early adult years are a mess of seedy toilets, drug-fuelled benders and sex parties filled with strangers.

Songs act as soliloquies, revealing Gabriel's troubled inner world. Personal demons are excavated through epic moments of fantasy. At numerous points, Gabriel is visited by the devil.

James uses magical realism as a powerful entry point to explore the

psychological depths of his characters. "Naturalism, to me, isn't very realistic," he says. "We're all complex beings, aren't we? And magical realism allows us to put that on screen."

He honed his storytelling voice in the world of theatre. His first play, *Llwyth*, can be seen as an embryonic version of *Lost Boys & Fairies*. Starring a fresh-faced Young while he was still at drama school, the play was directed by Arwel Gruffydd, who plays Berwyn, aka the drag queen Fanny Ample, in *Lost Boys & Fairies*.

Following a group of gay friends out on the town in Cardiff, the bilingual

While S4C has been showcasing Welsh-language talent for more than 40 years, it's still rare to find a bilingual Welsh and English drama on linear TV, something James finds "terrible" and long overdue. "It's a living language on this island!" he says, exasperatedly.

"I'm not purely doing it from a political perspective – I'm just putting [Welsh] in the drama because that's my life, so I want to reflect it," he says. "If, as a byproduct of that, we can give better representation to all these minority identities, that's a fantastic thing."

Young, who was born and raised in Cardiff and went to the same Welsh-



drama explored what James saw as the conflict between his Welsh and queer identities. *Llwyth* was the first Welsh-language play about gay characters to be written by a queer playwright. James describes it as a personal and political triumph. "It was one of the highlights of my life. When the audience stood up, and then my parents were on their feet, I felt like my identity was being validated by my community as well as my family."

With a Welsh and English drama on prime-time BBC One, James has his sights set on a new frontier. Growing up with Welsh as his first language, he rarely saw himself represented on mainstream TV, and had to endure terrible attempts at Welsh accents. "The message that gives to a child growing up is that your identity doesn't matter."

language school as James, felt empowered by the bilingual dialogue, which was "totally natural" and authentic. "It feels special to have this platform on a BBC One show, where people are going to be watching scenes in the Welsh language in the same way as so many have been doing with Spanish or Korean TV over the past few years," he says.

As for Duck Soup, with *Lost Boys & Fairies* as its debut series, it has confidently set out its stall. "Hopefully, [*Lost Boys & Fairies*] should leave you somewhere slightly different to where you started, where you see the world with a bit more scope and compassion," Wray-Rogers says. "It's the perfect calling card: this is who we are." ■

Lost Boys & Fairies is on BBC One and iPlayer from 3 June.

Fings are wot they used t’be

Matthew Bell investigates why audiences can’t get enough of nostalgia TV



If the UK’s booming classic TV channels were to share a theme tune, it would surely be Kylie Minogue’s *Better the Devil You Know*.

“People like familiarity and ITV3 is a very safe environment,” says John Williams, Head of Scheduling Strategy, ITV1, ITV3 and ITV4. “The evergreen dramas are nice and soft; *Vera*, *Endeavour*, *Midsomer Murders* are what the channel is – those are the pillars of the schedule. On ITV3, we do not do explosions or gruesome murders.”

The numbers do not lie: drama specialist ITV3 has been the UK’s number-one digital channel for the past decade, reaching almost 15 million viewers in January. And more nostalgia channels are entering the fray – Rewind TV began broadcasting on Sky late last month, offering vintage comedy (*Drop the Dead Donkey*), drama (*Department S*) and documentaries (*Whicker’s World*).

“[Gold] definitely has a comfort blanket element to it,” says Gerald Casey, Channel Director of the UKTV comedy pay channel. “During Covid, Gold’s performance was incredibly strong – people were scared, and nostalgic comedy is like a hug.

“Choice is overwhelming, especially in the VoD world and, for older viewers... with classic TV you know exactly what you’re going to get – familiarity, a guarantee of quality.”

Casey points to a vacuum in mainstream comedy, which his channel is happy to fill: “You need to make enough shows to factor in failure and build a consistent pipeline of hits. *Ghosts* really cut through – but compare that with the 1990s and the sheer volume of shows then.”

Classic comedy is the bedrock of Gold’s schedules. “The shows that were the big hitters of their time are most often the big hitters today – *Only Fools and Horses*, *The Vicar of Dibley*, *Porridge*, *Blackadder*, *Last of the Summer Wine*,” he says.

Even comedies below the top level can rise to the top. Last year, Gold resuscitated Ben Elton’s mid-1990s cop sitcom *The Thin Blue Line*, starring Rowan Atkinson. “Because it hadn’t been on the channel for years, it flew – its performance was as good as any of those big classic shows,” says Casey.

Gold also delves deeper into TV’s vaults. Mid-1970s ITV sitcom *The Fosters* – relocated from the US to a south London tower block – was the first

BBC/UKTV Gold



Blackadder

BBC/UKTV Gold

[ITV] portfolio,” explains Williams. “If we were doing this interview in five, 10 years’ time, hopefully, we [would be scheduling] *McDonald and Dodds* up against *Love Island* series 29, or whatever it is.”

How vintage do the channels go? “We don’t have a definitive cut-off date; as long as it’s good quality, remembered and loved, then we’ll go back a long way,” says Ayech at UKTV. “[But] there’s a point, especially with some of the sitcoms we show, where [they] start looking ropey. We have shown black-and-white *Steptoe and Son* but...we’ve decided not to do it again because it looks so old.”

Gold’s oldest show is generally *Dad’s Army*, although it has coloured two episodes of *Hancock’s Half Hour* – *Twelve Angry Men* from 1959 and *The Blood Donor* from 1961.

“Picture quality [matters] and we’re not going to go back to black and white. It needs to be more modern than archive from the 1960s,” adds Williams.

This is where Talking Pictures TV – which broadcasts on Freeview 24 hours a day and celebrates its 10th birthday next year – comes into its own. It’s a family affair – run by ex-film editor and distributor Noel Cronin, daughter Sarah and her hus-

British sitcom to feature an entirely black cast. It included Norman Beaton and, in his first regular acting role, Lenny Henry. “There is historical value there – someone’s got to be showing that; it’s a really important piece... and it’s still really good,” says Casey.

So-called nostalgia channels, however, can’t rest on their laurels. Casey’s UKTV colleague Emma Ayech, Channel Director of Drama, says her biggest audiences are generated by “the new stuff – we’ve rinsed all the really good archive and had our maximum numbers for it. *Inspector George Gently* used to be huge for us but now the big numbers come from [originals], such as *The Marlow Murder Club*.”

The Home Counties sleuther drew more than 2.5 million viewers in its opening month, and fits the drama template perfectly. As do the *Sister Boniface Mysteries*, which Ayech says are “gentleness personified – a moped-riding, crime-solving nun in a 1960s village.... There are crimes, people die, but it’s never going to be too awful.”

UKTV has ordered a reboot of the 1980s Jersey-set drama *Bergerac*. It hopes that, like Channel 5’s new version of *All Creatures Great and Small*, the series will encourage viewers to rewatch the much-loved original as well as the new version.

“It’s a virtuous circle,” says Ayech. “We’re always trying to freshen up [drama] and give people new reasons to come in.”

ITV’s Williams agrees: “[We] need to keep evolving. We’ve just injected

Shetland into the schedule on Friday nights.... ITV3 is a well-oiled machine... but, every so often, we have to bring in a new title.”

Unlike UKTV Drama, ITV3 has no plans to commission original series. But Williams points out that current ITV1 Sunday-night hits, such as *Grace* and *McDonald and Dodds*, will enjoy “their main life” on ITV3. It can be



Lenny Henry in *The Fosters*

ITV/UKTV Gold

a seamless transition from current to nostalgia telly.

The two ITV channels maximise audiences; when younger viewers are tuning in to three weeks of prime-time *Celebrity Big Brother* on ITV1, ITV3 offers a week of *Vera* or *Midsomer Murders* for the oldies.

“We’re keeping [viewers] within the

band, Neill. Operating from a garden office in Hertfordshire, the vintage channel offers an eclectic mix of largely British television series and films from the 1930s to the 1990s.

On the day that I chat to Cronin, Talking Pictures is showing *Crown Court*, *Danger UXB*, *The Brothers* and the original *Van der Valk* from the 1970s, ►



Van der Valk

ITV/Talking Pictures

The big hitters on classic channels

ITV3's top shows in the past year were: *Vera* – all four episodes of series 12 attracted more than 1 million viewers – *Downton Abbey* and *Heartbeat*.

UKTV Drama's *The Marlow Murder Club* in March had 2.7m viewers for episode 1 (over 28 days). In 2023, *Sister Boniface Mysteries* series 2 averaged 1 million viewers across 10 episodes

Drama's biggest sitcom audiences in 2023 were *Last of the Summer Wine* (428,000), *'Allo 'Allo!* (316,000) and *Keeping Up Appearances* (306,000).



The Marlow Murder Club

UKTV Drama

Talking Pictures' current best performers are: ITV private eye drama *Public Eye* (1965-75); the 1960s ITV crime series *Gideon's Way*; *Scotland Yard*, a series of cinema shorts from the 1950s; and its own show, *The Footage Detectives*.



Vera

ITV

Gold's big hitters in 2023 were: *Blackadder: The Lost Pilot* (659,000 viewers), *Blood Actually: A Murder They Hope Mystery* (515,000) and *Alison & Larry: Billericay to Barry* (307,000).

That year, *Only Fools and Horses* averaged 58,000 viewers on Gold, peaking at 239,000 with the episode *Modern Men*.



Sister Boniface Mysteries

BritBox/UKTV Drama

▶ starring Barry Foster. Films include 1951's school drama *The Browning Version*.

"I recognised a niche in the market for the older demographic," he says. "The stations were concentrating on a much younger audience. My view was that they were missing a trick."

The age of the content, though, is immaterial. "I take the view that, no matter the year, if it's good, it's good; if it's bad, it's bad. I still love the 1930s films, but we don't get a big audience for them, so I have to use them sparingly."

Talking Pictures received a huge boost during Covid, when audiences were literally captive, and it has prospered since; currently, it has "a million or so visits a day", says Cronin. "Without sounding boastful, we are unique."

Initially, Talking Pictures was primarily a film channel, but TV, which has more accessible libraries, is now close to parity. Series are overwhelmingly from the 1960s and 1970s; Cronin would love to show more older shows but they "simply don't exist any more – [thanks to] the wiping of tapes.."

"I don't think anyone realised that [TV] library content would become so valuable."

Targeting more recent series brings Talking Pictures into competition with ITV3 and UKTV. "If there's something that looks good, we're not going to get it," he concedes.

Talking Pictures is a shoestring operation, run on a love of all things vintage. Arguably, it's the country's best TV museum, but it has to survive commercially. "We have to be very cute with our shopping and dig around for the best value," says Cronin, adding: "We negotiate a licence with whoever has the rights – nothing's for free."

The good news for vintage TV fans is that the supply is almost inexhaustible. This month, Talking Pictures is offering Adam West-era *Batman*, one of the 1960s campiest shows, containing the archest of dialogue.

During the Euros, Drama will be showing the fabulously trashy *Footballers' Wives* and Gold is bringing back the almost-forgotten 1980s Nigel Havers sitcom *Don't Wait Up* for the summer.

"There are these gems still out there. I refuse to believe that there aren't – we'll keep finding them," says Casey. ■

For many of the young cast of new Channel 4 drama *The Gathering*, it was their first time in professional acting roles – not that viewers are likely to be able to tell.

The secret to eliciting such quality performances from newcomers is to leave them to get on with it, lead director Gareth Bryn told the Liverpool premiere audience.

“Sometimes, the worst thing a director can do is direct,” he said. “You can talk it to death, so sometimes the best thing is not to say very much. Cast it well and create an environment of trust so they feel they can be brave and try stuff out, then just let them be themselves and do what they instinctively want to do. Let them use their talent.”

Last month’s premiere and Q&A was held on the home turf of the stylish Merseyside-set mystery. The debut TV script by novelist Helen Walsh follows a group of elite teenage gymnasts and free-runners with tangled love lives and toxic parents in the lead up to tragedy.

Walsh told the event: “One of the themes is control and how much freedom we should give our teens. Do we give them too much or not enough, and do we judge other parents? Are our kids safer in the online or offline world? In the first episode, Kelly is offline, jumping off the roof of a tower block, while Jessica is glued to her iPhone in her bedroom but navigating very adult worlds. Which is more dangerous?”

Walsh added that she was particularly concerned about the drama’s portrayal of immigrants: “I cared most about the character of Bazi, who’s a refugee” – and does parkour [traversing obstacles while running]. “We worked with an incredible charitable



Eva Morgan in *The Gathering*

Channel 4

Tumbling to tragedy

North West New Channel 4 thriller *The Gathering* makes the most of its young cast and Liverpool locations. **Roz Laws** reports

organisation, Imix, which tries to change the conversation about immigration. And I was so happy that we captured the camaraderie and community of free-running, which can get a bad press. It attracts a lot of kids who don’t fit into team sports at school and are neurodiverse. It’s a vital space for kids.”

The adult cast includes Warren Brown, Vinette Robinson and Richard Coyle, but it’s the newcomers who stand out. Eva Morgan said of her lead character: “I admire Kelly, she’s so bold, truthful and unapologetic. She was equally beautiful and heart-breaking to play. It feels cinematic and magical, the

way it’s filmed, but then Liverpool is magical.”

The Gathering is made by World Productions, producer of *Line of Duty* and *Vigil*. Executive producer Simon Heath said: “We haven’t done any dramas with young characters for quite a while and I missed it. There’s a reward in finding new talent in front of and behind the camera. *The Gathering* looks so vibrant, and brilliant talent pops up even in the tiniest roles.

“I was excited to make a show that reflected my own experience of being a father to teenagers, and that captures the spirit of teens. ‘Are you drunk, Dad?’ I remember hearing just the other night.

“The themes of *The Gathering* are universal but the story is specific and local. There was never any question that we had to shoot it in Liverpool. It was wonderful to showcase the glory of the city.

“I have become a huge advocate for Liverpool. I don’t want to film in London because it’s a nightmare, I’d much rather film further north. You get much better value, which can be seen on screen. I really hope we can do a second series here.” ■

The Channel 4 event, was held with the support of RTS North West at the Everyman Liverpool on 13 May. The producer was Katie Paterson.

‘Don’t worry too much about having a plan.’ This was the advice given by Matt Brindley, Managing Editor of ITV News, to anyone considering working in news media.

For more than 20 years, he has forged a career in TV news as a programme editor, news editor and field producer, much of the time at ITN. He edited ITV’s *Invitation to a Royal Wedding* in 2018, and the previous year was editor of the ITV London team that won an RTS award for its Grenfell fire coverage.

As a field producer, he has reported on the Arab Spring, Sandy Hook, the hunt for Raoul Moat and the Oscars, among many other stories.

As a news-obsessed teenager, he was determined to get a job in newspapers and hoped that shifts on the *Sunday Times* would lead to a job as a print journalist.

“Coming out of university, I went for lots of newspaper jobs but didn’t get any of them and almost didn’t apply for a traineeship at ITN,” he recalled during an RTS Technology event at which he was interviewed by Humza Chaudhry, Head of Strategic Partnerships at ITN.

“Often, you find that the best things happen by accident,” Brindley said. He was accepted as an ITN trainee and has rarely looked back.

The ITV News executive paid tribute to Bernard Cole, a mentor at ITV Central News in Birmingham. “He taught me so much about what makes a good news story. Bernard had worked at the *Sunday Mercury*, where he was News Editor.

“He was very direct and candid with feedback in a way that perhaps isn’t popular today. For 18 months every day I sat next to him on the news desk and learnt an enormous amount.”

Another early influence was Richard Frediani, then



The hunt for Raoul Moat in 2010

Daily Mail/Shutterstock

The thrill of the chase

Working in TV news has given Matt Brindley a front-row seat at some extraordinary events. Steve Clarke reports

an editor at *ITV Evening News*, who taught Brindley the importance of connecting to ITV audiences outside London and producing a show with “identity and soul”.

Deborah Turness, ex-ITN CEO and now CEO of BBC News, was another inspirational leader namechecked.

Newsrooms have changed beyond recognition since Brindley began his career – and usually for the better. “They’re much more representative of the audience than they used to be,” he said. They are also more democratic places, nepotism is no longer fine and there is much more formal training available, including leadership training.

Asked to identify some of his favourite stories that he has covered over the years, Brindley mentioned the hunt for Raoul Moat, a Newcastle

nightclub bouncer and former prisoner who, in 2010, went on the run after committing murder and shooting a police officer.

“That was a week of adrenalin-fuelled coverage,” he said. “I hadn’t been at *ITV News* that long. It was so intense. All the days were spent newsgathering; and at night we filmed the people who were searching for him. Throughout the week some amazing stuff happened. On one infamous night we’d just finished *News at Ten* and he walked down the street in full view of all of us, carrying a sawn-off shotgun.

“He literally walked past us, and no one knew what to do. He’d been threatening to kill journalists. We half-heartedly chased him down the street, but he vanished. He’d been hiding in a storm drain. It was mad.” After

being cornered by police Moat died by suicide, shooting himself in the head.

“Covering that as my first big story had an enormous impact on me. Looking back, working as a field producer for *ITV News* was the high point of my career. I had four years working with amazing correspondents.

“I’m more of a generalist than a specialist,” he elaborated. “Most things interest me – home news, foreign news, politics, human interest stories and crime stories.

“To be honest, showbiz is a bit of a gap unless it’s West End musicals, which I’m all right on.” ■

‘In conversation with Matt Brindley’ was an RTS Technology Centre Event held on 30 April, produced by Kim Rowell, Managing Editor of News Production at ITN.

Phoenix Rise is a hit teen drama about a group of outsiders who help each other to fit in, so it's good to hear the same thing was happening behind the scenes. Eloise Pennycott arrived in series 2 as Daisy, when the cast had already been working together for three months, but she was quickly welcomed – thanks to her new friends learning British Sign Language (BSL).

The actor lost her hearing at the age of 11, and now lipreads and hears through her cochlear implant. She speaks in *Phoenix Rise* but used BSL to communicate through an interpreter at the RTS Midlands premiere of series 3, which was followed by a Q&A session.

She told the audience, full of her young co-stars: “Daisy and I both love dramatic entrances! Everyone was so welcoming and, within three weeks, the cast were learning sign language, it was amazing. I'm the first disabled person on the show, so I felt a lot of pressure and a huge responsibility to represent my disabled deaf community.”

Pennycott also confided a secret, revealing: “Krish Bassi, who plays Khaled, has some great music on his phone and we discovered it could be connected to my cochlear implant via Bluetooth. So, when you're watching some scenes when I'm looking professional, I'm actually listening to *Hamilton*.”

Funny and fresh, the BBC Three and iPlayer drama *Phoenix Rise* is a fantastic Midlands success story, promoting talent from the region and winning an RTS Midlands Scripted award last year.

It follows a group of misfits and excluded students given a second chance in mainstream education. Forty episodes have been filmed in Coventry to be screened in four series over two years, with the fourth series

Onwards and upwards

RTS Midlands

Hit Coventry teen drama *Phoenix Rise* is back for a third series. **Roz Laws** discovers what makes it tick



Phoenix Rise

BBC

dropping later this year and hopes of more.

The young actors are almost all from the Midlands, while the older cast includes Lauren Crace, Paul Nicholls, Wendi Peters and, new for series 3, Fleur East as music teacher Miss Meesha.



Eloise Pennycott

Vivienne Bailey

The X Factor star caused a stir among the starstruck cast. Tara Webb, who plays musically talented Rani, said: “Working with Fleur was so cool. I mean, I made a pipe-cleaner worry doll of her

when I was nine! I was really nervous about the singing scenes, but Fleur really helped my confidence.”

Series 3 ends with a Battle of the Bands at the Cov Rocks music festival and the soundtrack is composed by unsigned Midlands artists.

Co-creator Perrie Balthazar explained: “I used to go to a lot of raves in Coventry and my mum was into ska music, so I know the city's strong music history and we wanted it to be the heartbeat

of the show. Music brings a lot, sometimes when characters can't say anything. It heightens emotion.”

She added: “We hired all our supporting artists from local schools and as many regional crew as possible, although that's part of the problem – people have had to move away so there are only so many people here who can do these jobs.”

Co-creator Matt Evans added: “It's important for kids to see filming taking place and all the roles that are available, behind the camera as well as in front. It's good for kids to see that it's within reach. Careers departments are getting better – mine told me to work in a library if I wanted to be a writer.” ■

The *Phoenix Rise* premiere was held on 22 May at the Mockingbird Cinema, Birmingham. It was a co-production between RTS Midlands and BBC Studios.

Students are the winners at Plymouth FC

Devon and Cornwall

Students from across the South West gained expert advice on taking their first career steps in film, television and the creative industries as Plymouth Argyle FC played host to RTS Devon and Cornwall's "Breaking into media" event last month.

With more than 100 soon-to-be graduates in attendance, it gave them a chance to speak to employers and industry experts as they consider the transition from education to the workplace. Fittingly for a venue that

has just seen its club survive in the Championship with a last-day win over Hull City, the event was compered by *Match of the Day* commentator and RTS Devon and Cornwall committee member, John Roder.

The students met representatives from BBC South West, Beagle Media, Ocean City Media, Pushed, Rock Oyster Media, Seadog TV & Film Productions, Silverstream TV, Twofour Post Production, SW Productions, The Crewing Company, Yellow Mouse Studios and more.

They also had a networking lunch and a series of CV workshops, and heard about the RTS.

Matt Geraghty, RTS Devon and Cornwall committee member and the event producer, said that the move away from previous "Breaking into media" event styles to a more careers fair structure would be of more benefit to students who have just completed their degree studies or are considering their next steps post-education.

He said: "It was a really successful event; we've had

great feedback from the students and exhibitors. We feel that we have a duty to showcase the companies that operate and thrive down here, and show these students that there are alternatives to leaving the region when they graduate.

"The South West is a great place to live and work, and all the companies who came along to meet the next generation of creatives, filmmakers, producers and potential employees are testament to that."

Mike Baker

Northern Ireland

"How do you get your foot in the door in the creative industries?" It's a question many grapple with at the beginning of their careers but, in late April at Queen's University Belfast, RTS Futures Northern Ireland was on hand to provide some answers at the panel event "Lights, camera, access".

Chaired by RTS Northern Ireland Futures Vice-Chair Geraldine Smyth, the event saw local media experts share their top tips and hacks for breaking into what is a competitive industry.

When applying for a first job, agreed the panel, the importance of doing your research cannot be overstated. "Do your research very thoroughly on the company that you're going to meet, know what content it has made and what its strong points are," advised Kate McGlade, Development Executive at Alleycats TV.

Johnny Schumann, Creative Director at Flickerpix Animations, suggested job seekers always put their best work first in a showreel: "Don't send a showreel that's five minutes long... we might



Rebekah Newnes

Don't 'undersell yourself'

watch just the first 10 seconds."

With job interviews, Michaela McNally, Business Development and Partnerships Trainee at BBC NI, urged the audience not to "undersell yourself" and do not "think the other skills that you have won't be transferable".

The writer/director Aidan Largey, who has helmed

episodes of CBBC sci-fi drama *Silverpoint*, offered advice about working on set: "Make sure you're happy to be there [because], if people like you, they will want you to do well and they will help you."

UTV producer Alison Fleming recommended getting a mentor to "give guidance and expertise".

The panel also suggested alternatives to asking for work experience. Bernard McCloskey, Head of Education at Northern Ireland Screen, recommended: "Ask that person if they have 15 minutes for a cup of coffee and for some career advice, and then sit down with them and get a few more contacts."

Kirsty King

“There is a mental health crisis in the industry,” said Sophie Freeman, sharing the findings of The Film and TV Charity’s “Looking Glass 2022” report at an RTS West of England event in May to mark Mental Health Awareness Week. The event – led by Freeman, Engagement Producer for both The Film and TV Charity and at Bristol’s BBC Studios – looked at how TV productions can become more mentally healthy.

In 2022, 29% of respondents said they had considered taking their own life during the year. “That’s almost one in three people,” Freeman pointed out. “We’re all bound to know someone.”

The Film and TV Charity offers a range of support to help combat this crisis, including a free 24-hour support line, grants and financial advice.

“We’ve got... reactive support for people, which is unfortunately very necessary at the moment,” Freeman said. “But what we’re also trying to do is take preventative action... so that support isn’t as needed.”

The support includes the Whole Picture Toolkit, a



The latest ‘Looking Glass’ report reveals progress has been made in TV and film

Sky

Toolkit to boost mental health

website full of resources to make all stages of production more mentally healthy, which Freeman described as “co-designed by the industry, for the industry”.

Zoe Brandon, Head of Production at Offspring Films, has been using the toolkit for about two years.

Her first step was to identify herself as the person

who would be responsible for implementing the toolkit.

“I set about working on a wellbeing plan for Offspring,” she said. “I did that by systematically working through the toolkit and taking the bits and pieces... that were relevant to us.”

Brandon highlighted the “working well with me” form as a key tool, which asks crew members how best they can be supported. “It’s such a useful resource about what works for you.”

Overall, the situation seems to be moving in the right direction, she said: “[Company culture has] changed so much in the past few years – really, since we’ve implemented this [toolkit].

“There weren’t any conversations happening about mental health [before], and none of us really would have known... how to help someone who was struggling.”

Although the “Looking Glass” report may be a sobering reminder of the mental health crisis in TV and film, it also offers hope – 80% of respondents sensed a positive change in the industry’s capability to provide support. **Seraphina Allard-Bridge**

‘You’ve got to get yourself out there’

“Talent and hard work are not enough – you have to be able to hustle,” said leadership coach Tracy Forsyth, who was chairing the April RTS Futures event “Presenting yourself for success”.

Lyndsay Duthie, CEO of the Production Guild of Great Britain, said: “You have to sell yourself. There’s no point staying at home... jobs aren’t

going to come to you. You’ve got to get yourself out there.”

She admitted: “It doesn’t matter if you’re giving an Oscar-winning speech... or it’s your very first interview, it’s still nerve-racking.”

Jo Bret-Day, head recruiter at FLB Accountants, offered an employer’s perspective: “Everything stems from understanding yourself, which isn’t always easy. When

you’ve got that understanding of you, the rest should naturally progress – writing a CV and doing the interview.”

On the subject of CVs, Bret-Day added: “Keep it simple... keep it readable. Don’t fill it with graphics.”

Show persistence without being pushy when approaching employers, advised the panellists. Samuel Ampah, senior media accountant at Alliot’s, said: “Ultimately, everyone has been where you [are]. If you’re just starting, everyone has just started at some point. People want to pass on their knowledge.”

When you land an interview, prepare and practise

thoroughly. “If you’re prepared, you’re more confident,” said Ampah.

Networking is hated by almost everyone, said Forsyth. But, added Ampah, while it is “a very daunting experience going to a networking event by yourself, not necessarily knowing anyone, it is so, so important”.

He advised: “Turn up early... and take the long way around to the toilet so [you] can suss out the room.” Forsyth goes further, doing “a figure of eight” to scope the room at events she attends.

The Futures event was produced by Zach Duthie. **Matthew Bell**



Battle stations for TV election crews

As the nation braces itself for the July general election, rival broadcasters are gearing up to keep audiences engaged with what could seem to some like an endless campaign.

On the day Rishi Sunak called the election, *Channel 4 News* excelled, despite having only a couple of hours to organise its coverage. It was another triumph for RTS award-winning Editor Esmé Wren and the main presenting team of Krishnan Guru-Murthy and Cathy Newman.

Later on, BBC One's extended *News at Ten*, presented live from Downing

Street by the normally sure-footed Mishal Husain, seemed less well prepared.

Radio 4's *Today* has newbie presenter Emma Barnett, much loved on *Woman's Hour*, to add some extra spice to its general election coverage.

Congratulations on your new Media Act

To the relief of the UK's broadcast leaders, the much-delayed Media Bill squeaked through its final reading in the House of Lords on 23 May, hours before Parliament was prorogued.

There was concern from the likes of Tim Davie, Carolyn McCall and Alex Mahon that the Bill would be derailed by the Prime Minister's decision to call a snap general election.

The Media Act 2024 mandates PSB prominence and means that the streamers

will be regulated by Ofcom.

That's one less problem for a new culture secretary to worry about. Phew!

Best-in-class Sky gains a class act

Huge congratulations to the former Warner Bros. Discovery high-flyer and wonderful 2022 RTS London Convention Chair, Priya Dogra, who is soon to join Sky.

As Chief Advertising and New Revenue Officer, Priya will be responsible for leading and growing Sky's advertising sales and focusing on developing and enhancing other non-subscription revenue streams for Sky.

This is a newly created role. Priya said she was thrilled to be joining Sky, which "has been at the forefront of delivering best-in-class consumer experiences in entertainment and

connectivity, and I am delighted to be part of driving future innovation."

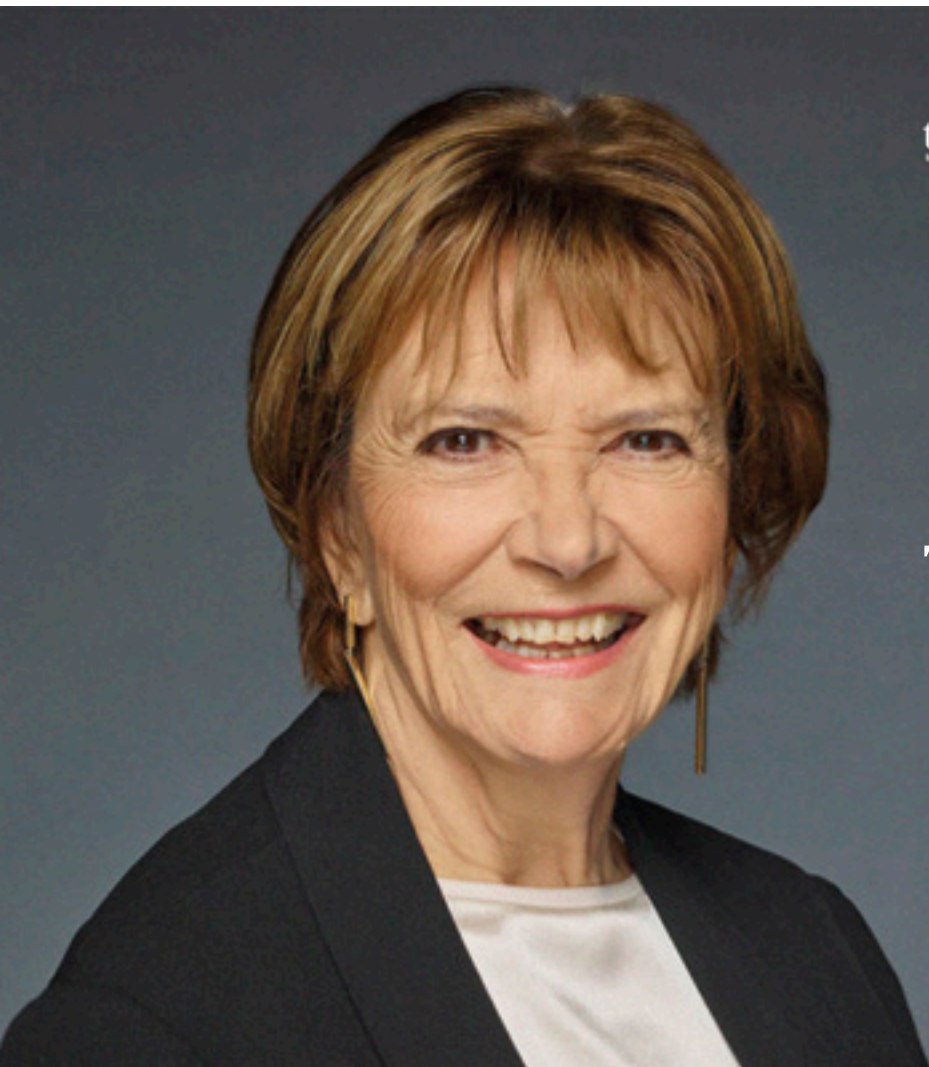
The Upside wishes her well.

TV prepares arena for leaders' debates

And finally, political junkies are looking forward to live general election leaders' debates on TV – the first of which should let us see Starmer and Sunak go head-to-head on ITV.

It seems a very long time since the then-Liberal Democrat Party leader Nick Clegg came out of the shadows to punch above his party's weight in a three-way TV debate with Gordon Brown and David Cameron in the 2010 election.

Opinion is divided on whether TV leaders' debates have any impact on how people vote but, for many, they are must-watch TV. ■



The Steve Hewlett Memorial Lecture

With Joan Bakewell

3 October 2024



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