

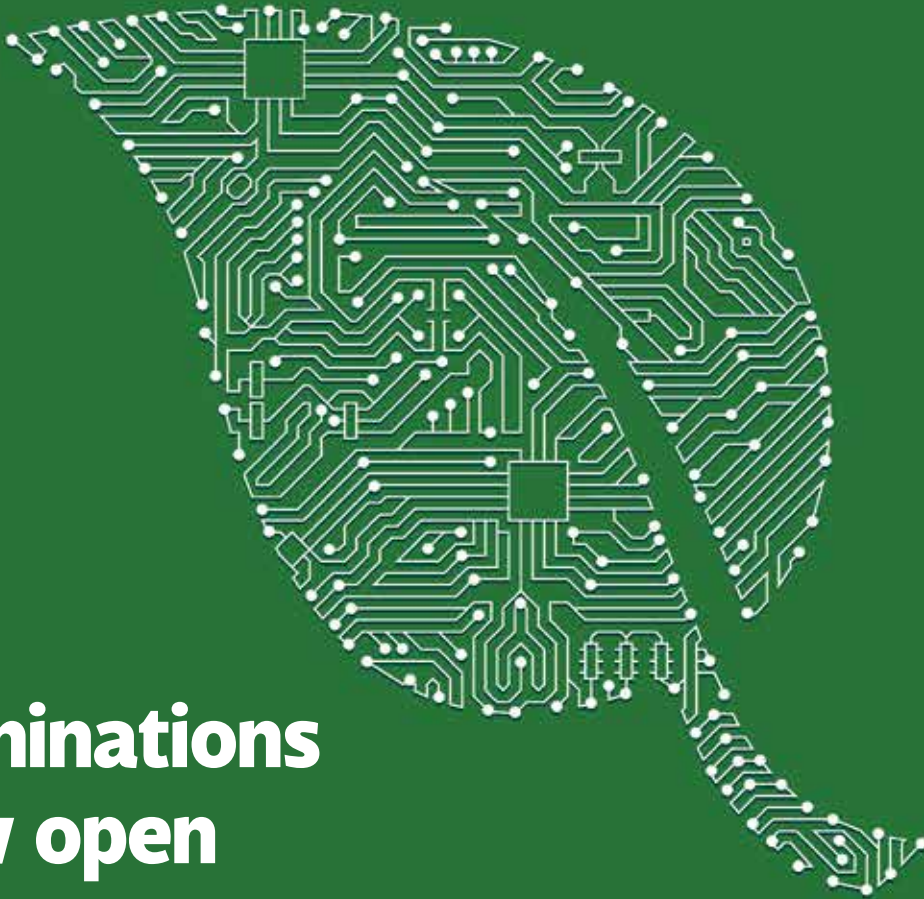
May 2018

# Television

A woman with long, wavy blonde hair is the central figure. She is wearing a vibrant red, long-sleeved dress with a subtle floral pattern. Her expression is neutral as she looks slightly to the right. The background is a rich, painterly landscape with green hills, a winding river, and a warm, orange-hued sky, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall aesthetic is that of a classic magazine cover.

**Comedy  
on a wide  
canvas**

# RTS / ATOS YOUNG TECHNOLOGIST OF THE YEAR 2018



## Nominations now open

**Applicants** for RTS / Atos Young Technologist of the Year 2018 can be from any sector of the TV and related industries

**The judges** will be looking for an application that demonstrates how:

- The applicant has already made an impact in this field
- The receipt of the award would enhance the applicant's understanding of the ever-changing role of technology in television and related fields
- The applicant proposes to share this enhanced understanding with others, both within the RTS and beyond

**The prize** is a full conference place at IBC, together with costs of travel to IBC and accommodation for the duration of the conference

**Application forms** and judging criteria are at:  
[rts.org.uk/YoungTechnologist2018](https://rts.org.uk/YoungTechnologist2018)

**Deadline:** Completed forms must be returned to Jo Sampson (JSampson@rts.org.uk) by 5pm on 25 May 2018

**Finalists** will be interviewed on the afternoon of 4 July 2018



**Atos**



## From the CEO



I am thrilled to report on the success of two recent early-evening events in London: “Mind the gap: Closing the gender pay gap in television” and the latest in our “Anatomy of a hit” strand, “Diving beneath the waves: The making of *Blue Planet II*”.

Huge thanks to the chair, and all the panellists who gave up their time to make both these events so memorable. And a special thanks to one of our speakers, Rt Hon Harriet Harman MP, who started the whole process for more transparency on gender pay.

Despite being delayed at the House of Commons, where MPs were debating military action in Syria, Harriet made such a vital and heartfelt contribution to the pay discussion. I was so

pleased that so many women gave up their Monday evenings to attend what was a passionate debate.

The *Blue Planet II* event brought fresh insights to one of the best factual programmes of recent times. The clips were amazing! You can read all about the bravery of the Natural History Unit’s team in this issue of *Television*.

From *Blue Planet II* to Sky Ocean Rescue, our broadcasters have been doing great work in highlighting the impact of single-use plastic products.

Talking of single-use plastic, you may have noticed an important change in how *Television* is delivered. I am delighted to say that, from this month onwards, the magazine will be coming to you in a paper envelope instead of a polythene wrapper.

Our cover story is Mark Lawson’s interview with the BBC’s head of

comedy, Shane Allen. His Midas touch has given us such great shows as the RTS triple award-winner *This Country*. Also, don’t miss a rare interview with Lynn Novick, co-director of that stupendous documentary *The Vietnam War*.

Next month, Esme Wren takes over as the new editor of *Newsnight*. She has done great work at Sky News and I have no doubt that she will make a big success of her new job. Tara Conlan’s profile of Esme is a fascinating read.

Finally, this month’s diary is written by one of my favourite BBC presenters, Anita Rani. I can’t wait to see her new programme on Bollywood and what it tells us about modern India.

Theresa Wise

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Cover: BBC/Jamieson

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## National events

### RTS FUTURES

**Monday 21 May**  
**U & VFX**

Hear from a panel of leading VFX and motion graphic artists and producers on how to get a first foot in the door of the visual-effects industry. 6:45pm for 7:00pm  
Venue: Channel 4, 124 Horseferry Road, London SW1P 2TX

### RTS EARLY EVENING EVENT

**Wednesday 23 May**

#### **Anatomy of a hit: Love Island**

Speakers include: Angela Jain, Managing Director, ITV Studios Entertainment; Caroline Flack, presenter, *Love Island* and *Love Island: After Sun*; Kenny England, senior digital producer, *Love Island*; Ella Umansky, head of format support, ITV Studios; Tom Gould, executive producer, *Love Island*. Hosted by TV presenter Ria Hebden.

This event will dissect the different elements of the show that delivered 'must-watch' TV. The session will also look at the importance of casting, promotion, product placement and global distribution, as well as the extensive digital and online presence, which contributed to its high profile and record viewing figures.

*Love Island* is an ITV Studios and Motion Content Group co-production for ITV2. 6:30pm for 6:45pm start  
Venue: The Auditorium at Foyles Level 6, 107 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0DT

**Tuesday 29 May**  
**RTS AGM**

All RTS members are invited to attend this important meeting which will help shape the year ahead at the Society. 6pm  
Venue: RTS, 7th floor, Dorset Rise, London EC4Y 8EN

### RTS EARLY EVENING EVENT

**Tuesday 5 June**

#### **Making shows great again**

It is one of the greatest dilemmas in popular TV – when to persist with a popular franchise, now long in the tooth, and when to mothball it, only to drag it out of the store cupboard, to enchant a whole new generation of TV viewers. Speakers: Sean Doyle, commissioning editor, Channel 5, *Blind Date*; Richard Mckerrow, executive producer, Love Productions, *The Great British Bake Off*; Clare Pizey, executive producer, BBC, *Top Gear*; and Ed Sayer, commissioning editor, Discovery, *Wheeler Dealers*. Chair: Caroline Frost, entertainment journalist. 6:30pm for 6:45pm

Venue: Cavendish Conference Centre, 22 Duchess Mews, London W1G 9DT

### RTS AWARDS

**Friday 22 June**

#### **RTS Student Television Awards 2018**

Venue: BFI Southbank, Belvedere Road, London SE1 8XT

### RTS CONFERENCE

**Tuesday 18 September**

#### **RTS London Conference 2018**

Sponsored by Viacom  
Venue: Kings Place, 90 York Way, London N1 9AG

### RTS MASTERCLASSES

**Tuesday 13 November**

#### **RTS Student Programme Masterclasses**

Venue: IET London, 2 Savoy Place, London WC2R 0BL

**Wednesday 14 November**

#### **RTS Craft Skills Masterclasses**

Venue: IET London, 2 Savoy Place, London WC2R 0BL

### RTS AWARDS

**Monday 26 November**

#### **RTS Craft & Design Awards 2018**

London Hilton on Park Lane  
22 Park Lane, London W1K 1BE

## Anatomy of a hit: Love Island

**Angela Jain**

Managing Director, ITV Studios Entertainment

**Caroline Flack**

Presenter, *Love Island* and *Love Island: After Sun*

**Kenny England**

Senior digital producer, *Love Island*

**Ella Umansky**

Head of format support, ITV Studios

**Tom Gould**

Executive producer, *Love Island*

**Ria Hebden**

(Chair)

**23 May** 6:30pm for 6:45pm

The Auditorium at Foyles, London WC2H 0DT

## Local events

### BRISTOL

■ Belinda Biggam  
■ [belindabiggam@hotmail.com](mailto:belindabiggam@hotmail.com)

### DEVON AND CORNWALL

■ Jane Hudson  
■ [RTSDevonandCornwall@rts.org.uk](mailto:RTSDevonandCornwall@rts.org.uk)

### EAST

■ Nikki O'Donnell  
■ [nikki.odonnell@bbc.co.uk](mailto:nikki.odonnell@bbc.co.uk)

### LONDON

■ Daniel Cherowbrier  
■ [daniel@cherowbrier.co.uk](mailto:daniel@cherowbrier.co.uk)

### MIDLANDS

■ Jayne Greene 07792 776585  
■ [RTSMidlands@rts.org.uk](mailto:RTSMidlands@rts.org.uk)

### NORTH EAST AND THE BORDER

■ Jill Graham  
■ [jill.graham@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:jill.graham@blueyonder.co.uk)

### NORTH WEST

■ Rachel Pinkney 07966 230639  
■ [RPinkney@rts.org.uk](mailto:RPinkney@rts.org.uk)

### NORTHERN IRELAND

■ John Mitchell  
■ [mitch.mvbroadcast@btinternet.com](mailto:mitch.mvbroadcast@btinternet.com)

### REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

■ Charles Byrne (353) 87251 3092  
■ [byrnecc@iol.ie](mailto:byrnecc@iol.ie)

### SCOTLAND

■ Jane Muirhead  
■ [scotlandchair@rts.org.uk](mailto:scotlandchair@rts.org.uk)

### SOUTHERN

■ Stephanie Farmer  
■ [SFarmer@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:SFarmer@bournemouth.ac.uk)

### THAMES VALLEY

**Friday 23 November**

#### **2018 Winter Ball**

7:00pm  
Venue: De Vere Wokefield Estate, Goodboys Lane Reading RG7 3AE  
■ Tony Orme  
■ [RTSThamesValley@rts.org.uk](mailto:RTSThamesValley@rts.org.uk)

### WALES

■ Hywel Wiliam 07980 007841  
■ [hywel@aim.uk.com](mailto:hywel@aim.uk.com)

### YORKSHIRE

**Friday 6 July**

#### **Annual Awards**

Venue: TBC  
■ Lisa Holdsworth 07790 145280  
■ [lisa@allonewordproductions.co.uk](mailto:lisa@allonewordproductions.co.uk)

# TV diary

**Anita Rani**, flush from her triumph at the RTS Programme Awards, makes her Bollywood debut



**W**ell, I only went and won an RTS! What a wonderful, unexpected bonus after making the most important piece of TV I've ever made. *My Family, Partition and Me* told the story of the Partition of India, the brutal end of the Raj.

Not only my story, the story of millions. My motivation for making it was realising, based on the reaction to my *Who Do You Think You Are?*, how little people know about this momentous period in history.

We talk about empire and railways, but what happened at the end is not discussed. Terrifyingly few British Asians are aware of what their own grandparents lived through.

The public reaction to the show has been immense. So many people have told me that they've now spoken with their families for the first time about what happened.

People want to share their own stories with me. Grown white men have cried in mid-conversation, thinking about it. On a personal and professional level, I'm so proud that this programme was made. So, thank you again to the RTS jury who thought me worthy.

■ **I'm in Leeds to attend the Creative Cities Convention. I grew up in Bradford and went to Leeds University, so this is very much my old manor. After uni, I made the decision**

to move to London to pursue men, money and a career in TV – though not in that order.

I remember discussing moving south with other students on my course. For quite a few, London just wasn't an option. They had no support network there and had no idea how they could afford to live while working as runners.

Luckily for me, my life back then was simple. I sublet a flat for £50 a week and survived on the cheapest instant noodles, chilli sauce and a pint.

■ We want to hear authentic voices, and we need more diversity in our industry. We want to generate wealth in parts of Britain that aren't the South East. We want to bridge the so-called North-South divide but, most importantly, we need to reflect the entire country.

So, it stands to reason that TV needs to spread the love. Plus, we live on a tiny island and Leeds is only two and a half hours away by train.

■ **I am in a voice-over booth. It's a comforting little soundproof box where the outside world doesn't exist. I am putting the final touches to Bollywood: The World's Biggest Film Industry. Fortuitously, no one has made a programme about Bollywood for a while.**

We think we know what it's all about – singing, yes, dancing, yes, melodrama, ramped up to 11.

There are also wonderfully surprising elements that reflect India's rapidly growing economy and the battle between a young generation of mod-

ern Indians, who want their stories told, and old, conservative India.

I get to make my acting debut in an Indian film. There was no audition, they just stuck me in it, along with a few other British extras who were sitting in a backpackers' café earlier that day.

■ In and around my life for the past two weeks I've been catching up with all things *Poldark*. I'm hosting a panel following the screening of the first episode of series 4 at the BFI.

I watched it in a packed NFT1 with around 200 (mostly female) *Poldark* fans. It was just like going to the movies in India. There was cheering, sighing, applause, muttering, tutting and gasping.

A totally satisfying hour of TV, perfect for a Sunday night after an episode of *Countryfile*. On the panel were the exec producer Karen Thrussell, the brilliant writer Debbie Horsfield and Aidan Turner.

I'm fascinated by the historical backdrop. We talk about the class struggle of the time, but the late 18th and early 19th centuries were also a time of slavery and colonialism. Britain was a major player in both. Debbie said that, in adapting the original books, she was going a bit rogue with parts of the story. Maybe there's room for a visiting Indian dignitary? It could be a maharaja or, possibly even, a Rani... Well, I have just got back from Bollywood!

*Anita Rani presents Countryfile and other BBC programmes.*

## Interview

### Social media brings a new source of pressures to the job of being the BBC's comedy chief, **Shane Allen** tells **Mark Lawson**

**B**oth *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and *W1A* – shows produced by the BBC Comedy department five decades apart – featured a gag in which the BBC head of comedy is revealed to be a dour, humourless figure on the brink of clinical depression.

“Yes. And *Episodes* did a bit of that, as well,” laughs Shane Allen, when the long-running gag about his job is mentioned, thereby establishing that it could not apply to him. The tape of our conversation is fittingly – though, given some of his predecessors, not inevitably – punctuated with his deep laugh.

The exact title on Allen's business cards is, in line with current BBC corporate structures: controller, comedy commissioning. Six years after he arrived from the equivalent post at Channel 4, the burly Northern Irishman can smile at 14 nominations in the 2018 Virgin TV British Academy Television and Television Craft Awards, for shows including *This Country*, *Detectorists*, *Famalam*, *Motherland*, *Inside No 9*, *Peter Kay's Car Share*, and *Pls Like*. *This Country* was also the stand-out success at March's RTS Programme Awards, winning in three categories.

“I'm a nerdy fan of comedy,” says Allen, “so this is the perfect job for me. The only downside is when you tell people what you do for a living. Because comedy excites such strong passions. Every week, my mother-in-law has a conversation about *Mrs Brown's Boys* and why it shouldn't be on TV. And I threaten that I'll put her in a home where she will have to watch it until she likes it.”

In common with those in other areas of programming, he worries that multi-channel competition and social media opinion-leading create a need to succeed immediately. But the history of comedy demonstrates that the first series of *Blackadder* “wasn't quite right”,

and, at the start, *Father Ted* “wasn't fully formed”, while *Only Fools and Horses* “really caught fire on the third series”.

You wouldn't get that time now? “I think the learning curve is truncated. Maybe 10 years ago, you got a chance at a second series. Which is why I'm a big fan of pilots – iron out the kinks, come to air fully formed.”

Allen is helped in serving a range of audiences by having notably broad tastes. He worked on Chris Morris's darkly subversive series, *Brass Eye*, but is also, defying his wife's mother, a fan of a show from an antithetical tradition

of bawdy populism: Brendan O'Carroll's *Mrs Brown's Boys*.

He stresses that the latter enthusiasm is not a case of being forced to support a hit he inherited at the BBC: “It started when I was at Channel 4, and I looked on jealously.”

O'Carroll has said that he targeted “the audience that television forgot”. Allen agrees: “I think it was – as it often is – a case of the secret public committee who apparently decide what's funny and what isn't. And, post-*The Office*, they decided that the studio sitcom was dead, not realising that



there is a huge number of sub-genres and schools.”

Growing up, the first TV comedy he loved was *The Two Ronnies*: “I remember all the generations watching together. And loving hearing my granddad laugh. There’s a physical reaction with comedy that you don’t get with other forms.”

Much work from the 1960s to the 1980s has proved astonishingly durable. *The Two Ronnies* and *Morecambe & Wise* still feature in the Christmas schedules, and repeats of *Dad’s Army* and *Fawlty Towers* can still top the BBC Two ratings.

“A lot of the stuff from that period is timeless because it’s character comedy,” says Allen. “They last for ever, and new generations discover them. Of more recent work, I think Alan Partridge is getting there.”

The obverse of such longevity is that some pieces from that period are now considered unfit for broadcast because of racist or sexist language and attitudes. One of Allen’s first decisions at the BBC involved making cuts to the racist rhetoric of the major in *Fawlty Towers*. He makes clear that, ultimately, “it was John Cleese’s decision to take it out”.

In a time when offence is so easily taken – and then rapidly inflamed on social media – does comedy become harder to make? “Yeah. I think there are more organised lobby groups these days because of social media. But, in a perverse way, it makes you more resolute. I see a lot of [the objections] as white noise.”

“Social media can be a playground for arseholes and cowards and bullies. I think – as long as you are forensic in your processes about why you are doing something – then I don’t think anything is off limits. So we do Frankie Boyle, and *Inside No 9* goes into some quite dark and challenging places: a snuff movie at Christmas, for instance. I think, in the past, where things have come unstuck, it’s been a lack of scrutiny and lack of referral. With Frankie Boyle, we work through the script, testing the editorial justification.”

So there has to be a right to offend people? “God, yes. There has to be. Different people will get offended by different things. You can’t legislate for potential offence, or you end up with the most homogeneously bland comedy.”

He admits to having read one sitcom where the language was so relentlessly strong that he felt it might put people off. Traditionally, BBC executives are nervous about specifying negative

examples, but Allen, when asked, immediately replies: “*White Gold*, first series. I got them to tone it down a bit. Later, the programme-makers told me they thought I was right.”

Another consequence of social media is personal abuse of writers and performers. Allen thinks that “there’s a duty of care with talent, especially younger talent”. Before transmission of *This Country*, his team contacted its creators, Daisy May Cooper and Charlie Cooper: “We said, ‘You will be tempted to look at social media for affirmation.

## AS LONG AS YOU ARE FORENSIC IN YOUR PROCESSES ABOUT WHY YOU ARE DOING SOMETHING – THEN I DON’T THINK ANYTHING IS OFF LIMITS

Don’t do it! If you do it, it’s your own fault if you get upset. Because it’s not a happy place.”

Do comedy makers even get death threats? “Yeah. It’s horrific. ‘Whoever commissioned this should be shot in the face.’” So does Allen follow social media? “No. It gets digested and reported to me. But, hand on heart, I’d never follow the reaction live. Because it’s a self-appointed elite and cabal. At the BBC, we’re often trying to find populist pieces and, the more populist a piece is, the bigger the backlash seems to be, paradoxically.

“When I was at Channel 4, the big shows – *The IT Crowd*, *Black Books* – were the studio shows. And that [genre] is shrinking now, and writers are often frightened of BBC One because of the seemingly inevitable backlash. But we are doggedly persisting in looking for populist, studio-based shows.”

Allen’s only regret about studio comedy is its historical effect on budgets: “Comedy was one tariff because it was studio-based, and drama was a higher tariff because it was shot on location. And that equation persists to this day.”

Whether in a studio or the currently

dominant genre of docu-com (*This Country*, *Detectorists*, *People Just Do Nothing*), Allen has increasingly come to the view that, for successful comedy, heart is as important as smart one-liners.

“That moment in *Mum* where the guy suddenly says his mum’s died. It’s like the death of Nan in *The Royle Family*, or when Cassandra has the miscarriage in *Only Fools and Horses*. I’m trying to find pieces with that kind of truth.

“The shows that have done quite well for us recently – *Mum*, *This Country*, *People Just Do Nothing*, *The Young Offenders* – they come from a real place. Stefan Golaszewski, in *Mum*, is writing about all sorts of people he has known in his life. *This Country* is so autobiographical, it’s unbelievable. I’m more nervous of high-concept things that can burn themselves out quite quickly.”

*Fleabag* and *The Young Offenders* also clearly feel very personal. So, is “sit-memoir” the prevailing BBC trend? “Yes. It’s very prevalent, writing about your own world. You can sniff the truth.”

With the BBC publicly committed to increasing diversity of race, gender, class and age, the comedy department has less to worry about than some parts of the corporation.

“When Victoria Wood and Caroline Aherne died in the same year [2016],” Allen remembers, “there was a panic about where the next funny women were coming from. But now, if you draw up a list of the talent you’d really want to work with – Phoebe Waller-Bridge, Holly Walsh, Sharon Horgan – they’re all women. And I think that’s the result of a deliberate shift in > > commissioning and having more women commissioning editors.”

Nor does there seem to be a retirement age for comedy writers. Eighty-year-old Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais, 82, revived *Porridge* last year, and Roy Clarke is writing a series of *Still Open All Hours* for screening in his 90th year: “It’s astonishing. Roy has written more half-hour comedy than anyone in the history of television.”

British comedy was also often seen in the past as an exclusive club for those of certain backgrounds. In the days of *Monty Python* and *Beyond the Fringe*, a search for new comedy talent often consisted of a BBC producer going to see that year’s Oxbridge revues, perhaps even staying over on his own old college staircase.

But, says Allen, “When we started *Famalam*, the question we asked was: >



Motherland

BBC

► how would you now do a ‘gang-show’, such as *Monty Python* or *Not the Nine O’Clock News*? And we decided that it would be young black people talking about their experience of life.”

The 20-minute *Famalam* is a good example of how newer distribution methods (it originated on the online-only BBC Three) allow the creation of unconventional formats, impossible in a standard, clock-watching schedule. “Yes, it’s quite liberating that you can just say that a show will be as long as it’s funny for.”

The most common private gripe from TV comedy writers and performers is being told by executives what is and isn’t funny. Allen recognises this problem: “That creative freedom element is crucial. I think, with people at the start of their careers, you want to give advice and warn against some mistakes, without being dictatorial.

“But, in a TV world where there are so many more places to sell your stuff and have a career, why is anyone going to come back to the BBC if you are heavy-handed and restrictive? I was pleased that a lot of talent from

Channel 4 – Peter Kay, Charlie Brooker – seemed to trust me enough to want to come across.”

Now that talent has so many other places to go, isn’t there a risk that the BBC could become a showcase for Netflix and Amazon to choose who they want to recruit? “I think that is already happening, with Charlie Brooker and Phoebe Waller-Bridge. And that’s why we double down on new talent. Netflix tends to want the famous talent and proven thing. But, in *This Country*, we took a punt on unknown people who had never been on TV before. And that has to be our thing: pipelining the next generation.”

The BBC’s best selling point, Allen believes, is large and verifiable audiences or, as he puts it: “It’s about eyeballs. Netflix doesn’t publish audience figures. And there was a gold rush towards Sky a while ago. But, then, people realise that no one’s really watching the show and say: can we come back? Steve Coogan got annoyed that people didn’t know what he was doing.

“Things such as *This Country* and *Cunk on Britain*, they get a million

overnight and then a million more on iPlayer. I think iPlayer’s a pretty potent force for making sure that people can connect with a range of stuff. Comedy is the genre that performs best on catch-up and box sets. So, we can give talent eyeballs and relevance.”

What have been his first mistakes as controller, comedy commissioning? “Oh, fucking hell. Where do you want to start? Tons. Mainly where we’ve rushed things to air, before they were fully formed – I think we’ve failed them.”

Will he give examples? “Nah. It would be mean on the talent.”

On his production slate for 2018–19 are second series of *Motherland*, *Flea-bag* and *Hold the Sunset* (with the long-run-averse John Cleese committed to return), third runs of *Mum* and *This Country*, and a fifth season of *Inside No 9*. *People Just Do Nothing* will be promoted from BBC Three to BBC Two.

“It’s a good patch at the minute,” says Allen. “But it’s like being a midwife – you’re just worried about whether the next one will come out the right way round.” ■



# OUR FRIEND IN THE NORTH WEST

When we were making *Accused*, Danny Brocklehurst

wanted to include a story about a taxi driver who takes a woman to the airport and then goes back and burgles her house. It was the stuff of urban nightmare.

We knew Jodie Whittaker (the new Doctor Who) should play the woman, and the driver's part, we all agreed, was perfect for the Liverpoolian Stephen Graham. But there was no way we could offer it to him, not with all those Scouser jokes ringing in our ears: "What do you call a Scouser in a suit? The accused." "What do you call a Scouser in a big house? A burglar." We offered it instead to Andy Serkis, and he played him to perfection.

This negative stereotyping of Liverpool – and Liverpool's sensitivity to it – have haunted me ever since I started writing.

It was there in *Brookside* in the 1980s and, when one of its most popular characters (Billy Corkhill) turned to crime out of sheer desperation, that abuse poured down upon us: "So we're all robbers, then, are we?"

It was even stronger in the 1990s, when I wrote a drama about the needle exchange scheme, an initiative that had saved thousands of lives by giving heroin users clean needles, something that was being universally praised at the time.

Unfortunately, I'd set this film in my native Liverpool and, once again,

**Jimmy McGovern** recalls how writing TV drama set in his native Liverpool inflamed local sensitivities



Richard Kendal

the abuse poured down: "So, we're all smack heads now, are we, Jimmy?"

In 1993, I wrote *Cracker*. It was full of lunatics and psychopaths and I didn't dare set it in Liverpool. Instead, I set it in Manchester and not one Mancunian voice was heard in protest. Why? Because they didn't have to overcome the negative stereotype, that's why.

They were able to see television drama production as the source of highly paid jobs and as a welcome boost to the local economy.

I went back to Liverpool to argue my case in a free Liverpool newspaper. "There is crime in Liverpool," I said. "Less than in Manchester, yes, but there is crime here and that's largely down to the fact that there

is poverty here, and the way to beat poverty and crime is to put money into people's pockets.

"And the way to put money into people's pockets is to give them well-paid jobs, the sort of jobs that come with television production."

I'd like to say that letters poured in in response and that they were overwhelmingly supportive but, sadly, that wasn't the case. Nothing happened. Nothing changed.

To this day, if you set a drama in Liverpool, there's a very good chance you'll be criticised in the letters page of the *Liverpool Echo*, a paper that claims to be the voice of the city but which gets printed in Oldham, Greater Manchester.

So what do I do? How do I recognise my city's sensitivity and yet still produce television drama from here? Well, right now, I'm doing it by working with LA Productions in Kirkdale, north Liverpool, one of the poorest communities in western Europe.

We base our production there (thus ensuring we get those well-paid jobs) but we set our stories in a vague North West, somewhere between Liverpool and Lancaster.

It's not an ideal solution, of course, and it leaves us wide open to another accusation: that of denying Liverpool-born actors the chance to act in Liverpool-set dramas, but it's a compromise of sorts and it will have to do me for now. ■

**Jimmy McGovern is a screenwriter and recently received the Lifetime Achievement award at the RTS Programme Awards 2018.**

**M**y name is Richard and I used to be a social media evangelist. Yes, I know, it's shameful and hard to believe. But, back in the 2000s, the infant social media held such promise for broadcasters and audiences alike.

In those sun-dappled days, we used to talk about the promise of interactivity, empowering the audience, real connection and insight into their thoughts and ideas. All this and free distribution!

Such innocence. As Noah Kulwin recently wrote in *New York* magazine, we failed to foresee “how the Silicon Valley dream of building a networked utopia would turn into a globalised, strip-mall casino overrun by pop-up ads and cyberbullies and Vladimir Putin”.

It's an age-old story. It started simply enough with a few likes and shares, which provided a harmless buzz of connection to the audience. But, soon, that wasn't enough. We started to crave more complex analytics and greater reach; we heard people talk of “engagement” – a state of deep, meaningful connection with our viewers – and, before we knew it, we were strung out, sweating in fear of an unannounced overnight tweak in the news-feed algorithm.

Those who cared about us started to worry about the company we kept, saying that they could no longer tell the difference between us and the clickbait and lies we hung around with...

And, all this time, while we spent more and more money to provide free content to the platforms, they, in return, seemed to play fast and loose with data and metrics.

As one leading TV commissioner recently told yet another fake-news seminar: “I feel like a woman who has been mugged for her handbag by a man in a Rolls-Royce.”

OK, perhaps that's taking it a bit far, but we do need a serious conversation about broadcasting and social media. With the benefit of hindsight, it's clear that the promise of reach, access to the elusive younger demographic and granular feedback through user data seduced broadcasters into allowing intermediaries to come between them



# Seduced by algorithms

Online

**Richard Sambrook** argues that broadcasters need to reset their relationship with social media

## 'I FEEL LIKE A WOMAN WHO HAS BEEN MUGGED FOR HER HANDBAG BY A MAN IN A ROLLS-ROYCE'

and the audience. We can't even say it was a strategic mistake. Where was the alternative? The platforms grew so rapidly on the back of extraordinary technology, and offered services that, inevitably, had broader, customised appeal than anything a single broadcaster could offer. The elusive under-30s audience was hanging out online, not in front of TVs.

There have been three core strategies for broadcasters on social media:

- Direct – based on the hope that users will click through to a broadcasters' own site, thus providing direct user value;
- Distributed – based on the reach value of those who serendipitously encounter the broadcasters' content in their news feed;
- Pure marketing – in effect, a variant of the distributed approach.

An executive at one major UK broadcaster tells me that they see no direct increase in TV viewing when they invest more in social media. Hard figures, of course, are closely guarded and difficult to find.

We took comfort from the big technology platforms saying that they weren't publishers – just distributors – before realising that the algorithms determining who saw what were not neutral or transparent.

Someone was making decisions about who saw our content without much discussion, agreement or openness. But those potentially huge reach numbers still seemed to justify us being there.

The problem has been that the platforms sacrificed quality for scale and sales – and broadcasters have not gained sufficiently from either.

Research from the Reuters Institute at Oxford University shows that many users fail to recognise media brands in their social feeds. Broadcasters face a huge challenge in trying to differentiate their content online or on mobile.

A square video, played silently for perhaps 10 seconds, may register as a metric, but it does not provide a quality experience and, all too rarely, attracts loyalty back to the provider.

At heart, there is a conflict between the purposes of a regulated public broadcaster in the UK and the purposes and methods of social media. Jonah Peretti, founder of BuzzFeed, has explained how "sharing" is the key

metric online. His and other sites are designed to encourage and enable sharing as much as possible.

Sharing may be a good indicator of consumer interest, but it is no indication of citizen value (a crucial responsibility for regulated media).

Social media encourages opinion over fact, and it is increasingly fed by outrage and emotion. Consequently, this feeds division. Emotional triggers encourage greater use, more data, and bigger profits.

Broadcasting, on the other hand, is committed to bringing audiences together for common experiences, a constructive public debate and building, rather than dividing communities.

Social media has been driven by brilliant technology and engineers, with little experience or interest in social or political policy, or anything qualitative that can't be measured and coded. A mix of naivety and hubris has meant that, until recently, the software engineers have been dismissive of social science or editorial judgement. As a consequence, a series of scandals and misjudgements has left them in what Noah Kulwin describes as their current "profitable crisis state".

Because, for all the inquiries, committee hearings, campaigning and debate, they remain hugely profitable, with ever-expanding user bases, while traditional media audiences continue to decline.

None of this is to deny the many benefits and extraordinary achievements of social media. But we can no longer pretend that there is a healthy relationship between traditional media and the newer tech behemoths. So, how might things be reset?

There is currently much talk of regulation but less clarity about what form this should take. Content regulation online would be hugely complex and likely to have damaging collateral consequences. Questions of scale, and

control of data, seem more fruitful areas to consider for intervention, but is anyone really going to break up the likes of Google or Facebook?

The Germans are regulating against hate speech, the French against "fake news" during election campaigns (but who decides?). The European Commission is looking at what can be done short of regulation.

Meanwhile, the UK has proposed a sensible if, so far, broad-brush digital charter to encourage best practice, with codes of conduct and more. But politicians have a weak understanding of the issues (as anyone watching the recent congressional committees can testify) and motivations that may not always be pure.

The social-media companies can be encouraged to self-regulate or reform, and are doing so. Where once Facebook believed artificial intelligence could manage all content, it is now committed to employing 20,000 moderators to do what an algorithm can't.

AI will develop and help further. It has largely removed pornography from the major platforms and can, doubtless, address hate speech and violence, too.

Some argue that Facebook and Google should be paying more money to content providers. But beware the handout trap. A couple of hundred million in a fund may feel good but it does little to address structural problems. A better solution might be proper payment for the content the platforms offer their users, or perhaps licensing of some form, as we have for music use or under the Newspaper Licensing Agency.

The digital environment means that, whatever our reservations, social media will be a key part of the future for broadcasters. But now is the moment to reset the relationship.

Broadcasters may not have the global scale or resources of Facebook or Google, but they have strong brands and are loved by audiences. They also benefit trust, accountability, experience, judgement and, above all, great content. The Faangs may need us more than they realise. ■

*Richard Sambrook is a professor of journalism and director of the Centre for Journalism at Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies.*

# How to close TV's gender pay gap

**T**he huge disparity between the salaries of male and female on-air talent at the BBC has attracted widespread and much-deserved criticism. But recently released figures on the gender pay gap reveal that discrimination exists across television, from the top to the bottom of the industry.

Channel 4 recorded the worst (mean) average pay gap – of 28.6% – of the major UK broadcasters, followed by: UKTV at 17.9%; ITV, 16.4%; the BBC, 10.7%; Sky: 5.2%; and Channel 5, where women are, in fact, paid 2.9% more than men.

Employers with more than 250 staff were legally required to report for the first time their gender pay gaps by 4 April (30 March for public bodies) this year.

Television is doing no worse than other UK businesses, but also no better. Analysis of the figures provided by 15 broadcasters and producers by industry magazine *Broadcast* revealed a mean pay gap of 14.8%.

This almost mirrors the 14.5% national mean across more than 10,000 organisations that published pay-gap reports. However, the mean bonus gap of 43.7% in the TV industry is three times the national mean gap, according to the magazine.

## Pay

### Matthew Bell hears new strategies to tackle unfair pay levels in television at an RTS event

Last month, an RTS early-evening event in central London – boasting a panel that included the architect of the gender pay-gap legislation, Rt Hon Harriet Harman MP, – asked television some tough questions about its treatment of women.

The panel also included BBC current affairs journalist Jane Corbin, who is one of the 170 members of the BBC Women group, which campaigns for an “equal, fair and transparent pay structure” at the corporation.

BBC Women, which includes much of the BBC’s big-name female talent such as Jane Garvey, Clare Balding and Sarah Montague, was set up in the wake of the publication last July of the list of presenters and journalists paid more than £150,000 by the BBC.

The list caused a furor, revealing massive discrepancies in pay between men and women doing the same jobs

at the BBC. Radio 4’s *Today* provided one of the more egregious examples: John Humphrys’ salary was quoted as being between £600,000 and £650,000, compared with the £200,000-250,000 paid to fellow presenter Mishal Husain.

Another *Today* presenter, Sarah Montague, failed to make the list of £150,000-plus earners, despite serving 16 years on the programme. Montague, who left *Today* at the end of March to host Radio 4’s *World at One*, recently revealed that she was “incandescent with rage” when she discovered the pay of her co-hosts.

“These are big sums; we are talking about very well-paid women and men, and that needs saying, especially when you’re talking to a wider public outside the media. These are stupendous sums of money, but, still, there is an equal-pay principle here,” argued Corbin.

The pay list revealed “a huge difference at the BBC between the top male on-air earners and the top women, and that was genuinely shocking”, she added.

The BBC’s median gender pay gap of 9.3%, she suggested, “presented a much better picture for the BBC, a lower-than-national-average gender pay gap”. Despite this, she said, the corporation “still had not addressed those shocking discrepancies in pay”.

Turning away from the BBC, Corbin

said she was also “shocked to see the Channel 4 pay gap of nearly 30% – that from an organisation that is fond of telling us about its credentials on equality and diversity”.

TV’s gender pay gap came as no surprise to Sian Kevill, the founder of factual indie Make Productions, as well as a former director of BBC World News and editor of BBC Two’s *Newsnight*. “Having been in the industry for many years, I’ve seen a number of reasons why you can end up with that kind of disparity,” she said, but admitted that seeing it “revealed in black and white was a real jolt to the system”.

And the evidence of systemic pay discrimination continues to grow. Jane Corbin’s report for BBC One’s *Panorama* in March revealed that Martina Navratilova was paid 10 times less by the BBC than another ex-player, John McEnroe, to commentate at Wimbledon.

Equality adviser Charlotte Sweeney, who completed the RTS panel, pointed out that television’s pay gaps were “not as bad as I’ve seen in many sectors”. What surprised her “was the level of surprise. You only have to walk around offices to see what’s going on.”

She argued that employers had a responsibility to put fair job and pay structures in place, but added that it was also up to women to push for pay >



Paul Hampartsourmian

Rt Hon Harriet Harman MP

## The time for discussion is over

Harriet Harman was a latecomer at the RTS early-evening event, having been detained at the House of Commons for the retrospective debate on the UK Government’s decision to participate in Syrian air strikes. When she did arrive, the Labour MP brought knowledge and energy to the discussion.

The former Minister for Women and Equalities was the key architect of the Equality Act 2010, which introduced the requirement to report gender pay gaps. ‘The point about the gender pay-gap information is to keep it really simple, so that everyone in their own place of work – management, men and women – can see what the picture is,’ she explained.

‘It [establishes] a baseline that reveals, for the first time, what is actually going on. Year on year, we need to see progress and we need to have stretching targets.’

‘These gaps are not there for us to be gnashing our teeth at, or for admiring those [organisations] that have the lower gaps. They are there for us to make progress towards equal pay.’

‘We’re beyond discussing why there might be a pay gap. We are no longer interested in the reasons or the justification – it’s just wrong. We should be setting targets to close it.’

‘The point is not for us to fume about it, but to use it as a spur for action. In a year’s time, we should look at [the

new] figures and see who’s had a wake-up call and really changed things, and who’s just coasted along.’

The MP raised the 89% bonus gap between men and women reported by the bank JP Morgan in one of its units as an example of the extreme discrimination that exists in UK business. ‘You shouldn’t dignify that with a discussion,’ she said.

‘It can’t be that the men at JP Morgan are so crackingly better than the women; it’s just pay discrimination.’

She explained that the focus of the gender pay-gap legislation on hourly earnings of men and women was significant: ‘We don’t believe that an hour of a woman’s work is worth less than an hour of a man’s work because she works fewer hours or part-time.’

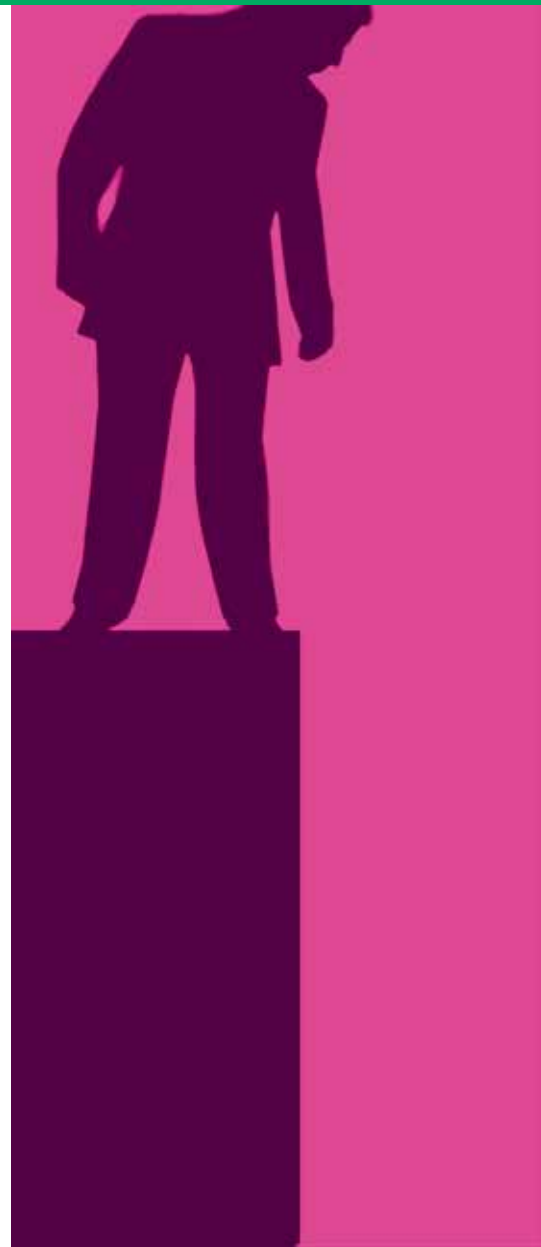
‘When I first started out in the House of Commons, it was 97% men and only 3% women. The men used to say that no women want to be MPs – there’s a supply-side problem. We changed the rules, so that 50% of [winnable] seats had to be women and, of course, the supply was there.’

All the things that are put up as obstacles will be rubbish. One guy said to me: ‘You metropolitan, London, middle-class women don’t understand. Northern women, they don’t want to be MPs.’



From left: Jane Corbin, Charlotte Sweeney and Sian Kevill

Paul Hampartsourmian



## QUESTION & ANSWER

**Q Sunjay Kakar:** Is there a danger that, by focusing on inequality of pay for women, other forms of pay inequality might get forgotten?

**A Harriet Harman:** “What about other inequalities?” is not a good question, because it implies that, somehow, we’ve got to justify having a session about gender. We don’t have to justify it – it’s a good thing to be arguing against inequality in relation to gender.

The thing we have to avoid like the plague is a hierarchy of inequalities; the idea that some inequalities are more important than others – that’s a real divide-and-rule mechanism.... All struggle against inequality is really an appeal to modernity; once one thing moves, the others move as well.

**Q Louise Ellard-Turnbull:** In 2004, I was made redundant from the BBC’s entertainment department [she had been working as edit producer on the quiz show *Weakest Link*] on the last day of my maternity leave, citing that I

was on a fixed-term contract... [Subsequently,] getting part-time work on a production [proved] nigh-on impossible.

How can [the industry] support women who want to take a little bit of time out, then work part-time in broadcast media and still... go on to provide for their family?

**A Sian Kevill:** If you come back in and are applying for jobs, whoever is on that [recruitment] board needs to understand about your background.

It’s not about [appointing] on a superficial [level] people who’ve just come out of a job. They need to understand, support and take a risk to bring somebody back who’s been out for a while and who’s got all the skills.... The industry needs to understand that there are lots of people like you out there.

**Q Lucie Ridout, freelance series producer:** How can we close the gender pay gap that exists [in the freelance sector]?

**A Sian Kevill:** It’s incredibly difficult.... Budgets have been pared back so much that there’s absolutely no fat.... It really is down to how corporations pay indies.... I’m genuinely really worried about the casualisation of our industry and what it will mean for women.

► rises and fight their corner. “Both organisations and individuals need to challenge [unfairness],” she said.

The increasing casualisation of the TV industry “fragments the landscape and makes it hard for women to know if they’re being paid [fairly],” argued Corbin. “We need more women on interview boards and at management level,” she continued. “At the BBC, there are a huge number of women at the lower journalist levels and they need to be given a chance to progress to the next level. They will start to earn more and this is how you will reduce the gender pay gap.”

The panel were in agreement that increased transparency – in other words, publishing pay rates and salaries – was crucial to closing the gender gap. But a Channel 4 HR spokeswoman in the audience said, “We’re not going to



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## UK broadcasters' gender pay gap

### BBC

10.7% mean; 9.3%, median

### BBC Worldwide

18.9% mean; 16.9% median

### Channel 4

28.6% mean; 24.2% median

### Channel 5

-2.9% mean; 2.1%, median

### Endemol Shine

0.1% mean; -4.3% median

### FremantleMedia

32% mean; -9% median

### ITN

19.6% mean; 18.2% median

### ITV

16.4% mean; 11.9% median

### Sky (corporate and broadcasting)

5.2% mean; 8% median

### STV

22.8% mean; 17.3% median

### UKTV

17.9% mean; 12.4% median

**The percentages explained:** The pay gap is the difference between the average hourly earnings of men and women, reported as both a mean and a median figure. A negative figure shows a gender pay gap in favour of women.

The mean male salary has been found by adding up all the men's salaries in a company and dividing by the number of male employees, then doing the same exercise for women.

The median male salary is the one in the "middle" when all the salaries of men in a company are listed in numerical order.

Bonus payments are also covered by the pay-gap legislation.

Shutterstock

[reveal] someone's individual pay, because that's confidential; however, I can assure you that we are very focused on [the issue]."

She described the requirement on employers to publish their gender pay gap as "the most impactful piece of legislation I've ever seen. It's certainly ensuring that people start paying attention, and putting in systems and structures to ensure that we don't have an unequal-pay issue, which would clearly be illegal."

"I'll be interested to see what changes over the next two or three years," said Charlotte Sweeney. "We're focused very heavily on data, which gives us a view about what's going on in an organisation, but I'm more interested in the narrative – what have organisations said that they are committed to doing?"

"It's about holding leaders [to account]

– you said you were going to do this, so, what has actually changed?"

Sian Kevill called for TV companies to carry out "transparent pay audits". She added: "There shouldn't be a let-out for any company – let us say that, in five years' time, there just shouldn't be a gap."

Corbin warned that, in TV, "where there isn't any money, it will cost to ensure that these [pay] imbalances don't happen. Not all the men are going to take pay cuts: it's not going to happen. So, the money will have to be found and that will be very difficult, particularly for the BBC and Channel 4." ■

**The RTS early-evening event "Mind the gap: closing the gender pay-gap in TV", was held at The Hospital Club in London on 16 April. It was chaired by Jane Martinson and produced by Martin Stott and Vicky Fairclough.**



# Dangers in the deep

**P**rofessional skill, time, money and the latest camera technologies are all vital to making landmark natural-history shows. Less well known, when it comes to seeking unique footage of life deep in the world's oceans, is how programme-makers put their health on the line.

The lengths that these men and women go to in the cause of producing iconic TV was explained in detail during an RTS event, "Diving beneath the waves – the making of *Blue Planet II*".

One of the most successful series of recent times (see box on page 18), the seven-parter presented by Sir David Attenborough was the result of 125 separate filming expeditions undertaken over four years.

Around 1,000 people across the globe were involved as the BBC's Natural History Unit corralled oceanographers, scientists, conservationists and

## Natural history

### Steve Clarke reveals the ordeals of the human heroes who captured the awe-inspiring images of *Blue Planet II*

local fixers and divers to make jaw-dropping TV.

The collateral damage included several bleeding ears. Sarah Conner, an assistant producer and "hardcore diver" on the team, suffered from a middle-ear infection and acute nausea.

"I don't know if what I did was brave," she told the RTS audience. "We all came to *Blue Planet II* with a lot of experience. We take to the seas after

a lot of research, so we know what to expect.

"We were given 50 pages of risk assessment, which tell us about everything that could happen and how to mitigate any risk. We are totally prepared. When you are down there you are in work mode. You have a job to do. It's an amazing job, but it is still us going there to deliver the product based on our experience and research."

Part of the job involved kneeling on the ocean floor for several eight-hour shifts, in sub-zero temperatures and utter darkness, using rebreathers, to direct cameraman Hugh Miller.

Her extraordinary patience, not to mention stamina, was deployed to get pictures of a Bobbit worm. These fierce creatures eat fish and can grow up to a metre long. In common with a lot of other animals, they often play hard to get. Their natural reticence was exacerbated in waters chilled by an El Niño weather system, rendering them less



## WE ALL CAME BACK WITH OUR LIMBS INTACT. THERE WERE A FEW BLEEDING EARS

active than usual. It wasn't until various lighting configurations had been tried that the deep-sea monster finally emerged from the seabed off the coast of Indonesia and filming could commence.

"I was kneeling there in complete darkness. It was a bit chilly," Conner recalled. "Your imagination [plays tricks on you] and I did end up with an ear and sinus infection, and nausea. When I got back to the boat I threw up."

It was Conner's efforts that made it possible for viewers to see the Bobbit worm stalk and capture its prey in episode 3. The scene is widely regarded as one of *Blue Planet II*'s most terrifying sequences.

The audience at the RTS event was shown a number of clips revealing how the programme was filmed. In one, crew members were seen filming from inside a small submarine as it was attacked by sharks.

The predators were distracted by the presence of the sub from feasting on the decomposing body of a whale, which was lying 700m below the surface, a gruesome sight never filmed at that depth. After a few minutes, they lost interest and returned to tearing lumps of meat from the whale carcass.

"We work with only the best underwater teams, people who've been at it a long time and really know what they're doing," said series producer Mark Brownlow. "It is their professionalism that enables us to do what looks dangerous and risky. Health and safety is fundamental to what we do. There is so much risk analysis and so much vetting."

"We all came back with our limbs intact. There were a few bleeding ears."

Executive producer James Honeyborne added: "Everyone involved has a passion for the ocean, that's what unites the team. For all of us, the health of the oceans is really important. There is a driving passion and a dedication.

"People put in the hours and put up

with the hardships to do it. Ice diving is uncomfortable but you do it because, if you want to show that world... It's the professionalism of the crews that enables you to work in such a hostile environment as the ocean."

Honeyborne, who commissioned *Blue Planet II*, told the session's chair, Torin Douglas, that, in conceptualising *Blue Planet II*, the aim had been to bring new stories to screen that viewers could connect with emotionally.

To find these stories, connections had to be made with the scientific community. He explained: "That relationship with oceanographic institutes, with individual scientists and also with dive communities around the world who are out there seeing stuff... That was going to be the source of our new stories."

He added: "The ocean is an alien, dark world, cold and full of slimy fish, which is sometimes terrifying. How would people sit at home on a Sunday evening and feel a connection to this world?"

"We realised that would be our biggest challenge. Ultimately, we wanted people to care about this world."

Putting together the epic series required extensive planning. The first task was to divide the programme into separate episodes and ensure that each one felt distinctive. "Different habitats allow you to do that," said Honeyborne. "One on the green seas, one on the big blue, one on coral reefs... The series starts to carve itself up."

At the beginning of the process, much of the content was sketchy, to say the least. "A lot of those stories come to you in the second or third year of production, when you've won people's trust and confidence," said Honeyborne. Serendipity played a big part. The story of giant trevally fish, which leap out of the ocean to grab terns, arose when a contact told the production team that he'd seen it happen.

"We looked into it. There were no >

## Sarah Conner: Life underwater



A Bobbit worm pounces

BBC

**Sarah Conner:** 'My job is to direct the underwater sequences. I've done a lot of technical rebreather diving.... Different diving skills are required for each type of shoot.'

**Torin Douglas:** 'What does directing involve? You don't say to a fish, "Do that again, please."'

**Sarah Conner:** 'A lot of it is to do with team management and the safety of the diving. Often, I would be in the water with the cameraman. We could be on communication devices, so we could talk about the shots we wanted to get.'

'Sometimes, you can plan shots, such as moving through the kelp. If it's whales moving past, you have to decide if you are going in with a lens to get close-ups or a lens to get wide shots. This is based on what footage you've already got. You are directing the cameraman rather than the fish.'

**Torin Douglas:** 'What are your qualifications for the job?'

**Sarah Conner:** 'I've directed a lot of natural history underwater segments for the BBC and for independent companies.'

'James approached me for the development stage [of *Blue Planet II*], but I was already working on something else. I did end up applying to work on the series. Mark and James gave me the job... For me, it was literally a dream job.'

'I was a contributor on *Blue Peter* and I realised TV was how I could share my passion and experiences, climbing and diving and other things that I've done.'

› records, but we thought, ‘Let’s give it a shot,’” said the executive producer. “We had a very finite budget and tight deadlines but, ultimately, you are gambling on nature.”

Brownlow, who managed a core team of 25 people, explained how a total of five producers were assigned to individual episodes. Meanwhile, researchers scoured the world, looking for material. “Finding a story can take up to a year,” he noted. Narrative arcs would then be pitched to Honeyborne and story boards drawn up.

Inevitably, technology was critical in getting the shots necessary to engage audiences. Helicopter-mounted cameras, specialist pole-mounted tracking cameras and drones were all used.

The audience saw a clip showing how bespoke suction-cup cameras were attached to the backs of a family of sperm whales.

For the first time, these gave film-makers the ability to record the whales’ complete dive cycle. “We invested a huge amount of time, effort and money building groundbreaking camera equipment,” said Brownlow.

WhatsApp enabled the rushes to be sent back via the internet for feedback. “It’s a [case of] constant refinement while you’re on location,” said the series producer. “Do we stay longer or do we pull the plug?... What can we do to improve it? Do we go back next year?”

A year was spent assembling the material into something that looked like TV. A single episode involved 15 weeks of editing. “We’re always trying to raise the bar and ensure the stories are compelling,” said Brownlow.

Writing the script and adding the soundtrack were, of course, critical. This meant “working with David [Attenborough] to make sure the words seamlessly matched the images. And working with our composer, Hans Zimmer, and his team in LA, to ensure that the music was evocative and helped tell the story.

“The secret of natural-history film-making is to have minimal commentary. Let the visuals and the music tell the story and set the emotional tone. And just a little bit of guidance and poetry from Sir David.” ■

***‘Diving beneath the waves: The making of Blue Planet II’ was an RTS ‘Anatomy of a hit’ event, held on 24 April at Kings Place, London. It was chaired by Torin Douglas and produced by Sue Robertson.***



**Blue Planet II highlighted the serious impact that plastic waste is having on marine wildlife**

Public domain

## A spur to action on plastic pollution

**James Honeyborne:** ‘We always set out to provide a contemporary portrait of the world’s oceans. Had we provided a timeless classic of these amazing animals, all happily getting on with their lives, it wouldn’t have been true to the oceans as we know it.’

**Mark Brownlow:** ‘I was very pleased that the audience figures didn’t drop off during the course of the series.’

‘People were equally compelled by the closing environmental episode as they were by prior episodes.’

**James Honeyborne:** ‘I think my understanding of plastic pollution in the marine environment has changed completely in the past four years.’

‘Not that we hadn’t seen it before on our beaches... Weirdly, you often find the biggest deposits of plastic in the most remote places...’

‘I think we are only still learning about the scale of plastic pollution in

the oceans. The insidious nature of the spread of plastic... we had that incident of the baby sperm whale that had a plastic bucket in its mouth.’

**Torin Douglas:** ‘But the programme’s impact has forced politicians to take this issue seriously. Did this surprise you?’

**Mark Brownlow:** ‘You never know how the audience will react. There are always environmental groups doing great work on these issues, so what we were saying wasn’t new.’

‘We were just providing a platform that got the broader message out.’

**James Honeyborne:** ‘TV has the ability to turn a spotlight on a subject... As documentary-makers, it is the most rewarding thing to feel that a subject we’ve played a part in highlighting has become such a big conversation.’

‘Everywhere we look, people are talking about it.’

## Blue Planet II by numbers

The series involved 125 expeditions, 6,000 hours of filming underwater and 1,000 hours filming in submersibles.

One trip, taking a submersible to unprecedented depths in Antarctica, took a year and a half to organise. Out of the 125 expeditions, the team only came back empty-handed from three.

The show was the UK’s most

watched TV programme in 2017. Episode 1 was seen by 14.1 million people in the week it was broadcast. This was the third most popular programme of the past five years, beaten only by 2014’s football World Cup final and the 2016 *Great British Bake Off* finale.

The series was pre-sold to more than 30 countries.



Florentine Films/Stephanie Berger

# Television as catharsis

**C**an something as apparently ephemeral as a TV programme be genuinely cathartic and help to bring a measure of healing, perhaps even closure, to a national tragedy? That was the hope behind the making of *The Vietnam War*, the acclaimed documentary made by Ken Burns and his long-time collaborator Lynn Novick.

Last month, PBS America began showing the 18-hour directors' cut in the UK. This followed the British premiere of the 10-hour version by BBC Four last autumn and its repeat over Christmas.

This epic production, using the film-makers' trademark vocabulary of still photographs, archive clips and carefully juxtaposed interviews, was included on several TV critics' lists of 2017's best programmes. The *Daily Telegraph* described the series as "a massive triumph". A Bafta nomination was announced in April.

When the first episode of *The Vietnam*

## Documentary

**Lynn Novick, co-director of *The Vietnam War*, convinces Steve Clarke that documentary can be more dynamic than drama**

*War* made its debut in the US last autumn, almost 12 million people watched. The aggregated US figure for the full 10 episodes was 40 million. The DVD version has topped Amazon best-seller lists in the US, the UK and Europe.

But catharsis? Who knows? It's a big ask, as Lynn Novick is only too well aware. "We're in the realm of tragedy and, I hope, catharsis. We use the word catharsis a lot," she says. "I am not sure I can give the proper definition but, from what I

understand, there's a sense that you have to be immersed in the experience and feel these feelings authentically to have a true catharsis.

"There's something very cleansing about that if it's done properly. The Greeks figured that out.... I don't think we were consciously looking for that, but, if you create a work of art that allows people that opportunity, it's powerful and profound. Ultimately, we were hoping that is what would happen."

The film is not the first and, almost certainly, won't be the last, to trace the grim trajectory of the Vietnam war. But it does feel definitive by virtue of its painstaking authority.

What is unusual about this retelling of the history is that it includes Vietnamese perspectives – from both North and South Vietnam – as well as the more conventional testimonies drawn from American combatants, their relatives, politicians and civil servants. And, at a time when fake news is rife and the media seemingly becoming more subjective, *The* >

► *Vietnam War* brings a cool-headed objectivity to the full sweep of the disastrous story of US involvement in an Asian war.

Stepped up by John F Kennedy and further escalated by Lyndon Johnson, American entanglement in Vietnam became a byword by the late 1960s for what liberals identified as Western imperialist folly.

“Our hope was that, in laying out the facts as best we could determine them, people could draw their own conclusions,” says Novick. “I, personally, entered the process thinking that I knew a lot about the Vietnam war and found out how little I knew.”

After working on the film off and on for more than a decade (production finally started in 2011 after the decision was taken to make the show in 2007), she became overwhelmed by the tragedy of Vietnam: the loss of life on all sides, the country’s devastation and the lies and obfuscations of America’s political leaders.

“I don’t want to be pigeonholed as pro-war or anti-war,” she insists. “It’s a deeper question than that. But I do think that we, as human beings, are obligated to understand what war really is and what it does to people.”

We are sitting in a smart London hotel. The documentary-maker is here for a round of promotional interviews. Despite it being midday, she wears a black cocktail dress. She fiddles restlessly with her necklace, talks like she’s drunk too many espressos and fizzes with intellectual energy.

Novick has worked alongside the celebrated Ken Burns since 1989, first as an associate producer, then producer, and, for 20 years, as his co-director on such series as *Frank Lloyd Wright*, *The War* (chronicling America’s experience in the Second World War) and *Prohibition*.

So, given the new focus on gender issues and that it is Burns who receives most of the credit for these stylish documentaries, does she feel somewhat marginalised? “I think it’s fair to say that, during the many years we’ve worked together, the spotlight has been mostly on him. It’s partly due to gender and partly due to his success before I came to work for him.”

She joined Burns’s company, Florentine Films, in 1989, a year before *The Civil War* (about America’s civil war) made its debut. The success of that seven-part series brought Burns celebrity status in the US, where he subsequently became a prominent public intellectual.

“He’s gotten bigger and bigger over time as more work has come out,” she suggests. “I think it’s difficult for the media to see us as an equal partnership.... We’ll never be fully equal in terms of stature, and that’s appropriate, but I think gender does play a role.”

“I don’t think I was aware of this until all this stuff came out,” Novick adds, referring to the #metoo campaign prompted by the allegations of sexual misconduct by Harvey Weinstein and other male show-business executives.

She continues: “Do I think it would be different if I were a man? I don’t think I would have articulated that until about a year ago... I’ve never experienced sexual harassment or any of the horrible things that we’ve seen, but I definitely have.... Looking back, I do think there is a marginalisation partly because of my gender.”

Does she think this has impacted on her career? “Well, I think it’s affected the lack of recognition. My career in terms of working with Ken has been fantastic. We have chosen to make films together and it’s been amazing.”

She makes the point that, in the US documentary-making sphere, there are many women working in influential positions. PBS – for which she and Burns have made all their films – is run by Paula Kerger, CEO for more than a decade.

However, at the recent Directors Guild of America Awards (where *The Vietnam War* failed to win) all the other documentary-makers were male. “It’s a fact that men get more recognition,” Novick says.

She explains that, in her own career, “I have generally kept my head down and done work that I consider important”, rather than worry about any kudos that might come her way. “I’ll keep doing that. It’s what gets me out of bed in the morning.” Winning recognition is not a motivating factor. Her work is, in itself, fulfilling, challenging and all-consuming. “It’s what I love to do,” she states.

There is a caveat. In future, she thinks she will be more aware of the need to “advocate for one’s self than I was before”.

In any case, despite Burns’s celebrity, film-making is an inherently collaborative process. Novick’s description of the culture at Florentine makes it sound democratic: “It’s a very open process, where a lot of people chime in. What we try and do is create a space, particularly in the edit room,



Temporary US airfield in 1966

where no one is afraid to say anything, certainly no one shoots down an idea because it’s not theirs. Sometimes, our best ideas come from our interns.”

Significantly, for the first time, one of her new projects gives her lead billing over Burns. On the series, provisionally entitled *College Behind Bars*, she is the sole director, while Burns is an executive producer. The film aims to tell the story of how some inmates of the overburdened and troubled US prison system use the experience of being incarcerated to gain an education.

In common with all her films, *College Behind Bars* will feature exacting and meticulous interviews conducted with the protagonists.

Her ability to empathise with her subjects, and to develop relationships with them before their formal interviews with the camera rolling, has been remarked upon. What are the traits of a good interviewer? “Trust and be present. Listening without judgement. Whatever you might be feeling about what someone is telling you, try not to reveal that.

“Really, really listen and create a space where people can reveal themselves. Doing your homework is also important. You have to reveal a little of



AP

yourself, too. Who am I? What right do I have to ask these questions? Tell people who you are.”

Her own journey towards the partnership with Burns began in the 1980s, when she was considering whether she wanted to work in TV journalism or as a documentarian. She graduated from Yale in 1983 with a major in American Studies.

Novick’s family mainly worked on the science side of things – as doctors, psychologists, “all the other side of the brain”. They were, therefore, perplexed at her wanting to find employment in the media. In fact, she recounts, “I did start on a pre-medical track, but then decided I wanted to do humanities. To be honest, I didn’t have a plan, so I floundered around for a bit.”

The breakthrough came when she realised that storytelling and making history more accessible through film appealed to her. She recalls being moved by two TV series that engaged with the history of the US: “In the early 1980s, I saw a PBS film, *Vietnam: A Television History*, and remember thinking, ‘Wow, that’s really powerful – this is a history I don’t know and it’s jumping off the screen’. Also, there was *Eyes on the Prize*, about the history of the civil

rights movement. I recall thinking that this is reaching me in a way that the books I’d read didn’t. There is something about a story told on TV or film that is so immediate.”

As is usual for her work, the funding for *The Vietnam War* came from individual and corporate sponsors. Since the 2007–08 financial crisis, obtaining backing has become tougher. “So, over the past 10 years, Ken and I have been finding individuals,” she explains.

“With our income-inequality problem, a lot of wealth has been sucked up into the 0.1%. There are a lot of people from a variety of political stripes who are interested in what we do. We’ve been able to find many of them and that has been very helpful – but it is difficult.”

Once the money is handed over, the donors have zero influence on the content of her shows. “It’s a good investment. Our funders are pretty happy, to be honest.”

A film of the weight and authority of *The Vietnam War* could not be further removed from the instant gratification of click-bait culture. This, she argues, is one reason why serious documentaries are back in vogue.

Novick is sceptical that the streaming services’ investment in high-end

documentary will last. The film-maker reasons that the likes of Netflix and Amazon want to establish global brands, rather than show one-off films.

“Once they’ve established these brands, they will retrench and stop funding documentaries. I hope not, but I think it’s very possible.” Her own viewing habits include British costume drama, such as *Downton Abbey* and *Victoria*, and *The Daily Show*.

In an era when so much attention and money is devoted to TV drama, it is perhaps salutary to note that the entire budget for *The Vietnam War* was \$29m, including the educational outreach initiatives attached to the project. Imagine what 18 hours of drama might cost in today’s climate of ballooning drama budgets.

But will audiences watch the directors’ cut in its entirety? “A lot of people say to us: ‘People’s attention spans are shorter than ever nowadays. Who’s going to watch 18 hours?’

“We feel there is an appetite for immersion in a long-form story, whether it’s scripted or non-fiction. It’s something you spend time on, be it *Mad Men*, *The Sopranos*, *Victoria* or *The Vietnam War*. The work that we do has added appeal, because it really happened.” ■

## Profile

Can *Newsnight*'s new chief, **Esme Wren**, bring in Westminster's big beasts to the BBC Two flagship? **Tara Conlan** reports

Speculation that BBC Two's *Newsnight* might be axed was firmly squashed in February, when Sky News head of politics, business and specialist journalism, Esme Wren, was appointed editor of the flagship show.

Doubts about its future had re-emerged last autumn with the introduction of Nick Ferrari and Emma Barnett's ITV series, *After the News*, and the announcement that *Newsnight* editor Ian Katz was leaving for Channel 4 to become its director of programmes.

Despite BBC News cutbacks, insiders say that the programme's survival was never in doubt – and the appointment of Wren (a former *Newsnight* staffer) indicates how robustly the corporation supports the show.

She started her career in television journalism on *Newsnight* in 1999 as a producer, before moving to Sky News, in 2005, as deputy executive editor of *The Sky Report*, with Julie Etchingham.

Her former boss ex-*Newsnight* editor Peter Barron says: "It seems to me to make perfect sense that she's come back [to *Newsnight*] as editor and has collected the right kind of experience along the way. I remember her as an excellent producer, and a very good political producer, in particular.

"Her move is a good appointment; she has done a great job at Sky. She understands the political landscape and is a great operator."

During her time at Sky, points out presenter and editor-at-large Adam Boulton, she was promoted to run the whole political operation, and played a central role in the televised election debates. "She arrived as a producer.

I first worked with her, I think, during Boris Johnson's mayoral campaign,"

Boulton recalls. "It was immediately apparent that she knew her way round this type of journalism."

He argues that, in a world where "politicians have become more inclined to play favourites in terms of access", her experience will be key at *Newsnight*. "She has



An editor steeped in politics

fought those battles very successfully” in situations such as the EU referendum.

During his *Newsnight* reign, Ian Katz was lauded and criticised in equal measure for garnering publicity by introducing fun items. These included the unlikely sight of Kirsty Wark dancing to Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* in 2013.

While Jeremy Paxman left on Katz’s watch, Emily Maitlis has become renowned for obtaining scoops and her widely praised coverage of US politics. Recently, she landed the first UK interview with former FBI director James Comey.

Her interviewing style may differ from Paxman’s, but her grilling of Theresa May over the Grenfell Fire (nominated for an RTS Television Journalism Award) showed her effectiveness.

With so much politics to cover (not least, Brexit), and social media and rival news sites competing for viewers’ attention, *Newsnight*’s job has become much more complex. And, while Tom Bradby’s ITV series *The Agenda* is unlikely to return, *After the News* is expected back on screens this year.

Some commentators claim that *Newsnight* finds it hard these days to get interviews with the political heavyweights. Wren’s dealings with No 10 and her extensive political contacts apparently put her ahead of other outstanding candidates for the job.

Boulton comments: “Because Esme has worked on *Newsnight*, she knows the programme very well. I think she’s well placed to innovate and reform, but in a sensible way, and not just as a new broom.”

Her work ethic and drive were apparent from the outset, say former colleagues. She attended Portsmouth Grammar School and studied politics at Bristol University; and was a Fulbright scholar, reading political science at the University of California. Her entry to television in 1999 came after she studied broadcast journalism at City University.

Boulton notes that, when she joined Sky, she was selected for a fast-track talent scheme, adding: “What she has developed at Sky News is the more managerial side of her career. In recent years, it is, increasingly, one of the ways journalism has been evolving. You have to manage up as well as down.”

That she is used to dealing with obstruction from the political parties’

## SHE IS FULL OF IDEAS. SHE IS REALLY COLLABORATIVE, VERY SUPPORTIVE. YOU ALWAYS KNEW SHE WAS OUT BATTLING FOR YOU

machines will stand *Newsnight* in good stead. Inevitably, as a public service broadcaster, the BBC comes in for more scrutiny than its commercial rivals. Another former colleague says that, although she has great contacts, she “keeps her distance from politicians”. Any spare time she has is spent on outdoor pursuits, such as cycling, running and surfing with her family, and walking her dog. She is a mother of two daughters.

Wren’s skill as a producer was much in evidence at last year’s RTS Cambridge Convention. She masterminded the hypothetical scenario in which news chiefs had to react to breaking news of a terrorist siege at a London restaurant.

Among her achievements at Sky, Wren is credited with enabling more women to cover politics. Anushka Asthana, now the *Guardian*’s joint political editor, was hired by Wren as a political correspondent.

“I was a mum when I joined Sky News and then fell pregnant again. Esme was hugely supportive of making sure I could both succeed in the job and maintain time for my family,” says Asthana. “She really did a lot to support myself and Sophy Ridge, hiring us both, helping us to move up the system and be really well looked after.

“She’s always on the look-out for correspondents or reporters, generally; but also women who are doing well in

## BBC EXECUTIVES WANT THE SHOW TO FEATURE THE ‘MUST-WATCH’ BIG INTERVIEW OF THE DAY

the lobby, to make sure we had a well-balanced team. That’s not to say she didn’t have some great blokes, too.”

Asthana adds: “Esme’s steeped in politics [and] she’s full of ideas. She is really collaborative, very supportive. You always knew she was out battling for you and would look out for you and wanted you to do well.

“It was a very collaborative atmosphere; the idea was to help each other and support each other. She did that not just with the reporters but also with the production team.”

As a previous editor of *Newsnight*, Barron is one of the select few who can know how Wren will be feeling and what challenges await: “For me, the big thing about *Newsnight* is there are, literally, no rules. You’ve got 45 minutes every night and can do with that whatever you want, as long as it’s interesting.

“You can do one item for 45 minutes or, theoretically, 45 one-minute items. You can do whatever you want within that window every evening.

“It’s best when you go quite far away from the perceived news agenda and worst when you just do four or five items in depth that were in the main bulletin. I would encourage [her] to have fun and experiment like crazy.”

Wren’s *Newsnight* is still being formulated, but one source says the BBC is particularly keen about her big-hitting political journalism background. BBC executives want the show to feature the “must-watch” big interview of the day – something that it was renowned for when Jeremy Paxman was a presenter.

What is undeniable is that Esme Wren will want to put her stamp on a show that has been making headlines since it began nearly 40 years ago.

Winning two awards at the recent RTS Television Journalism Awards – for Gabriel Gatehouse’s report on the Rohingya crisis and its coverage of the Grenfell fire – suggests that the programme has finally emerged from Paxman’s long shadow.

The new editor will require no reminding of the need to generate scoops and to have an effective social-media strategy. In the era of fake news, well-resourced public service journalism that provides genuine analysis of complex issues has never more necessary. In this context, *Newsnight*’s role is more important than ever. ■



Hospital



The Only Way Is Essex

BBC/ITV

# Trust trumps all

**T**here was a press furore last month, when the BBC admitted that a scene showing tribal people living in tree houses was faked by the makers of *Human Planet*.

A few weeks later, the BBC withdrew the series from distribution after finding a second editorial breach. A scene showing a hunter apparently harpooning a whale was revealed to be inaccurate.

Meanwhile, Sundog Pictures was suspended by the BBC for six months last year after its documentary *Hidden Australia: Black in the Outback* “knowingly and materially” misled viewers. A sequence that purported to be from a single party was actually filmed over

## Factual TV

**Tim Dams** asks when it is legitimate for makers of unscripted shows to stage scenes in order to heighten a narrative

several separate occasions. Widespread press coverage of such incidents appears to demonstrate the outrage that many viewers feel when programme-makers betray their trust.

That could be because, in an era of fake news and data harvesting by tech giants, TV has emerged as one of the most-trusted forms of media.

Ofcom CEO Sharon White said in a recent speech that eight in 10 viewers believe public service broadcasters deliver high-quality shows. “Amid the volatile seas of politics and technology, our public service broadcasters remain a trusted port of call for people seeking fairness, accuracy, insight and impartiality,” she said.

Nevertheless, there is a widespread



awareness in the TV industry – and among viewers themselves – that some factual programmes are more truthful than others.

The factual genre now encompasses a huge variety of programmes – from constructed reality such as *The Only Way Is Essex* and *Made in Chelsea* at one extreme, through the likes of *Love Island* and *The Apprentice* and other factual entertainment shows to blue-chip documentary series, such as *24 Hours in Police Custody* and *Hospital*.

In each case, different programme-making rules apply. While it's OK to "construct" reality in *The Only Way Is Essex*, it's a complete no-no for a serious documentary to do so.

Audiences are sophisticated and understand the difference between the many varieties of factual shows, reckon programme-makers. "People take constructed reality with a pinch of salt – they are wise to it," says Leila Monks, co-founder of Antidote Productions, which has produced highly regarded docs such as BBC One's *Addicted: Last Chance Mums* and *Professor Green: Suicide and Me*. "But there is no way we could, or would, twist things for dramatic effect in our films."

"Most people watching TV are more than aware when they are being served up something called reality and, conversely, when they are being served up something real," says Simon Dickson, creative director of Labell, which makes BBC Two's acclaimed *Hospital*.

He says some of *Hospital*'s most compelling scenes involve doctors arguing in corridors about which patient will get the one remaining bed. "It is not *Love Island* – it is not steroidal storytelling. It is very low-battery stuff. But it is incredibly revealing."

The executive in charge of *Love Island*, ITV Studios' creative director for entertainment, Richard Cowles, points out that there is a big distinction between the two kinds of shows. *Love Island* is a construct that creates an "arena" specially for the show, while an observational documentary follows people in a real environment.

The *Love Island* production team "shapes stories", says Cowles, but doesn't script them, because it is important for the participants' relationships to be wholly authentic.

He uses the phrase "accelerated reality" to describe the show. *Love Island* controls the pace of the stories, accelerating or slowing them down. Participants can talk to producers off

camera about how they are feeling and explore what they might want to do about it.

Other traditional reality tools will also guarantee drama, such as putting contestants in a situation where they have to make a choice. All this is fine, because *Love Island* is a construct, the producers set the rules, and the cast know what they are stepping into.

"The grammar of television has changed, but I think the viewer has come along with it," says Cowles. The young viewers who enjoy such shows

## THERE IS A WIDESPREAD AWARENESS... THAT SOME FACTUAL PROGRAMMES ARE MORE TRUTHFUL THAN OTHERS

are, after all, the Instagram generation: "They are a very wise audience, they are aware of all the tricks."

Still, he believes that it is important not to mislead viewers. The programme still has a duty to represent people fairly. "We do lots of research with audiences about the show," says the ITV executive. "The key thing that always comes through is authenticity. They don't want to feel it is fake. In terms of their generation, the word fake is probably the biggest insult they can give one another."

Is there a danger, however, that these kinds of techniques are spilling over into all areas of factual programming?

BBC guidelines are clear that factual producers should not stage action or events that are significant to the development of the narrative. The BBC's natural history guidance is a bit broader. In certain cases, for example, the corporation accepts that there can be an editorial justification for using captive animals to portray what might happen in the wild. But they insist: "We must never claim that such sequences were shot in the actual location depicted in the film."

Channel 4's guidelines also take a strong line on accuracy: "The truth must not be sacrificed for the sake

of a more entertaining programme, if this means cheating the viewer."

Little wonder, then, that Labell's Dickson sounds aghast when asked if there are any circumstances when it would be acceptable to script an observational documentary such as *Hospital*.

"You never recreate or, indeed, artificially create or extend or expand actuality," he says. "We don't have to try particularly hard to make *Hospital* dramatic. The challenge comes in making sure it is complicated, subtle and sophisticated."

The UK is considered pretty rigorous about factual accuracy in programmes, certainly compared with the US, where many high-profile reality shows are considered works of fiction rather than fact.

Still, there are concerns about the trustworthiness of some factual programmes in the UK. "Lots of things have changed in terms of the standards and the way people behave. It's all much looser and freer and wilder than it used to be," says Sue Bourne, the director of such acclaimed single documentaries as *A Time To Live* and *The Age of Loneliness*.

Greater competition for viewers, high broadcaster expectations and falling budgets have all coalesced, putting pressure on factual programme-makers. "Production companies, and young people who are out on the road and who haven't got much experience, are probably being put under quite a lot of pressure to make particular storylines deliver," Bourne suggests. "The one thing broadcasters know about me is that I am very protective of the people who are in my films. Out in the field, you get people to agree to take part in your films because they trust you, and you can't ever betray that trust."

Dickson accepts that "British factual television is among the best in the world". But, he says, many programmes are derivative and don't reflect the true complexity of life. He cites the simplistic "time's running out" narrative structure that is so prevalent in factual TV.

He clearly speaks for many documentary-makers when he adds that he's never felt the need to artificially inflate the drama in his documentaries. Human life is already full of drama, he argues: "I am in the business of documentaries because every single day you come across things that, literally, could not be made up." ■

# UKTV ups the stakes in drama

**F**or almost a decade, UKTV, currently owned jointly by BBC Studios and Discovery, has been screening innovative and successful original entertainment shows. Over the past five years, the number of original shows has grown fivefold. Today, UKTV commissions in every genre, other than children's, news and current affairs.

Chief Executive Darren Childs unveiled this strategy of supplementing an archive-led schedule with shows commissioned in-house in late 2010. An early hit was *Dynamo: Magician Impossible*, a risky and relatively expensive project for the 11-channel network. More recently, comedy panel show *Taskmaster* became a breakout hit, earning award nominations on both sides of the Atlantic.

The network is now turning its attention to TV's most expensive and competitive genre: drama series. The aim is to further differentiate UKTV from rival content providers.

In March, the broadcaster appointed its first dedicated drama executive, Philippa Collie Cousins, who joins the team this month. Developing new writing talent is already part of Collie Cousins' skill set – she was head of drama and comedy development at Hartswood Films, where she worked on the award-winning *Sherlock*.

UKTV's new drama originals include four crime and thriller series, each six-parters, for pay-channel Alibi. After premiering there, the crime shows will air for free on Drama. In addition, there is a six-part PR story, *Flack*, starring Anna Paquin, best known for her role in HBO's *True Blood*, for female-focused channel W.

Director of commissioning Richard Watsham explains: "I think the appetite of audiences [for drama] is absolutely enormous and has been

## UKTV

The multichannel broadcaster is raising its game by commissioning new dramas. **Ed Gove** investigates

building. I don't see that dropping off... The opportunity to commission our own original content in that space felt too good to miss."

He dismisses any suggestion that the drama market is saturated, and highlights the success of UKTV's Drama channel, which grew its audience by 7% in 2017, making it, alongside Dave, the UK's top non-PSB channel.

"This is an opportunity for us to create some origination that absolutely nails and defines the tone of voice of those channels," Watsham emphasises.

The shows being green-lit are a mix of "spikier" reputational pieces and procedurals, an area which, he notes, has been "lean of late". He declines to put a figure on UKTV's investment in

drama. The shift to commissioned drama is not so much a policy shift as simply the next step in UKTV's journey in ordering original shows.

The extension from comedy formats, such as *Taskmaster*, to comedy-dramas, such as 2017's *Murder on the Blackpool Express* (Gold's most popular programme to date, with an audience of 1.8 million, according to Barb), has been careful and deliberate.

"I actually don't see it as 'we do comedy and we do drama,'" Watsham reasons. "We're doing scripted content... We're already playing in that space."

However, being the new face on the drama block does bring challenges. Can UKTV compete with the sheer firepower and deep pockets of its competitors? Even the BBC is still working out the best way to compete effectively with new streaming competitors such as Netflix.

"When we talk about making great drama, it is us working with the same producers that BBC One or ITV or Channel 4 work with," he explains. "Great storytelling isn't about the size of the budget.

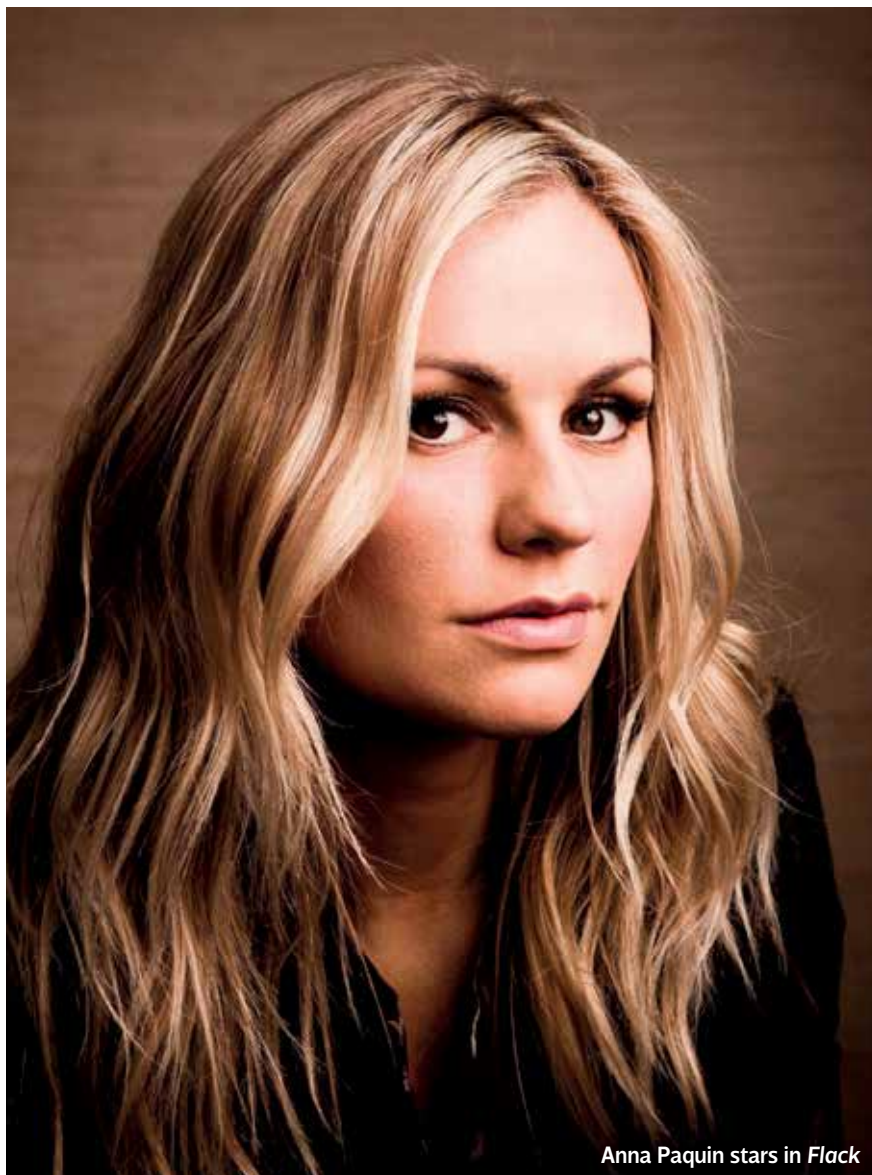
"With the high-end tax credit in place, and budgets north of £1m per hour, we should have enough money to support quality storytelling."

UKTV's first drama series, *Flack*, is produced by Hat Trick, and stars Paquin as a London-based American PR, with RTS winner Sophie Okonedo as her cutthroat boss.

Hat Trick Managing Director Jimmy Mulville reckons that UKTV could have a bright future in drama. "If it can make a couple of shows that make a splash and turn a few heads, that's good for everybody," he says. "The challenge for UKTV is getting an audience to watch the show."

It's a challenge that Watsham is happy to accept: "The lucky thing is that we are somewhere that people go

THE OPPORTUNITY TO COMMISSION OUR OWN ORIGINAL CONTENT IN [THE DRAMA] SPACE FELT TOO GOOD TO MISS



Anna Paquin stars in *Flack*

UKTV

to for drama. It's a genre around which we have built two entire channels [Alibi and Drama]."

*Flack* is a co-production with US entertainment channel Pop – a model that UKTV intends to replicate across all its dramas. "We have to have partners," says Watsham. "We're not going to fully fund those shows and, frankly, it wouldn't make good financial sense for us to do so."

"Does that mean we can't make really risky projects? Yes, probably. Drama is a risky area, anyway. In terms of doing riskier, more domestic, pieces, I think that will probably come later on."

Although international sales may be on the cards in the long term, for now, securing UK rights is the main requirement of each deal.

The priority is to plough as much money as possible into commissioned dramas through production partners

"that aren't stepping on [our] ambitions to broadcast in this territory", says Watsham.

In a newly created role, Ronan Hand joins this month from ITV Studios as director of programme funding. He will be working to support the policy across all genres, drawing together commercial partnerships, co-productions and programme distribution deals to fund upcoming UKTV commissions.

The broadcaster has long been underestimated by the public and by programme-makers, Watsham believes. But the success of its original commissioning is changing that perception. No longer do they receive proposals "with BBC Three crossed out and Dave written on top in crayon", he laughs. "The quality, breadth and innovation of what we're doing, and the risk in certain areas, all provide an opportunity for producers and talent that they may

not get elsewhere." That will be fundamental to the success of UKTV's move into drama series, he believes, and which he hopes will lead to some long-running, returning shows. "Our opportunity doesn't just come from co-production partnerships. It doesn't just come from my budget going up. It comes from the number of brilliant ideas that come through the door."

Producers seem to appreciate UKTV's more hands-off approach. "They're not micromanagers," says Mulville. "The thing about having relationships with your customers is that they need to be based on honesty, and the ability to have those awkward conversations when you need to have them... but UKTV is not on the phone every five minutes."

It is this reputation that will protect UKTV's commissioning ambitions in the wake of any changes in the company's ownership, Watsham believes.

When Discovery completed its acquisition of Scripps earlier this year, it also took over the 50% of UKTV owned by Scripps, and triggered a change-of-control clause. This grants BBC Studios the option to acquire the 50% of UKTV that it does not already own. As yet, there has been no news of a definite bid, but reports suggest that this could be as high as £500m.

Ownership by a single organisation could be expected to affect the broadcaster's commissioning ambitions. But Richard Watsham does not anticipate major change: "If we keep providing opportunity for... talent of all types to come and do their best work, and to do work they couldn't do elsewhere, then we're going to be in the best position, whatever comes up."

Regardless of what the future holds, he is confident that UKTV can deliver the calibre of drama that its audience demands: "There is no better time.... Now it is Alibi's chance to step into the spotlight." ■

## C4 drama masters virtual reality

**Scotland Centre** The creative team behind *Kiss Me First* shared the story of its development, and the technological challenge of combining live action and virtual reality at an RTS Scotland event at Glasgow's Film City in April.

The Channel 4/Netflix co-production began its six-episode run on the UK channel in early April.

Executive producer Melanie Stokes explained why she was so moved by Lottie Moggach's debut novel and its depiction of the isolation of teenage life. The joint MD of Kindle Entertainment felt there was only one writer to do the project justice.

Balloon Entertainment co-founder Bryan Elsley is best known for his work on E4 teen drama *Skins*. Stokes pitched the book to him at a TV festival in Galway, and



Channel 4/Mark Johnson/Colin Hutton

both shared an enthusiasm for the assured tone of Moggach's tale of a strong young woman's courage.

It was Elsley's idea to translate the book's chat-room activity to avatars in a

virtual reality. To achieve this, the production team had to create and then integrate a gaming experience into the narrative of a TV series, which is when Axis Animation became a key

player in the development of *Kiss Me First*. Co-founder and CEO Richard Scott explained how animation director Kan Muftic responded to the challenge and created the virtual reality in which much of the story unfolds.

The panel discussed how different the development was from the normal drama process. The actors worked together in a virtual-reality studio and their movements were mapped to the 3D world being created by the Axis team.

Elsley described the process: "One of the most rewarding things about motion capture is that it's like working in the theatre. You're in a room and the cameras are nowhere and everywhere. It's immediate in a way that we're not used to in film and television."

**James Wilson**

## S4C looks to digital future

**Wales Centre** Following the recent review of S4C by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), authored by Eurnyn Ogwen Williams, RTS Wales hosted an event in Cardiff in mid-April to discuss the broadcaster's future.

Williams was one of the panel – chaired by Ruth McElroy, professor of creative industries at the University of South Wales – with S4C CEO Owen Evans and S4C Chair Huw Jones.

Jones set out S4C's response to the review, welcoming the UK

Government's aim to free up the broadcaster to commission digital non-broadcast content. "The promise of a new remit – with an emphasis on digital development and a wide-ranging audience – is fundamental," he said.

The S4C Chair also announced plans to spend £3m over the next three years to fund a new digital strategy, adding: "Internally, new skills will be needed, a new mindset, driving new developments forward while maintaining the linear channel."

Evans said that new technology offers S4C the

opportunity to understand audience preferences through analytics and the personalisation of its digital services.

Williams explained why the review recommended that S4C be funded entirely by the licence fee, absorbing the current DCMS grant, which is currently around 8% of the channel's income.

"In my view, it is a choice between receiving government funding, which could vary annually, and the stability offered by a fully funded licence-fee settlement for a five-year period," he said.

**Hywel Wiliam**

## Glasgow media tips

RTS Scotland assembled a panel of experts to offer advice on getting started in TV, at the Creative Media Network Scotland Student Festival in Glasgow. Kevin McCrae from Playdead, Bianca Barker of Steadipix Productions, Purple TV's Margot McCuaig and film-maker Conor Reilly discussed their career challenges. They encouraged students to keep knocking on doors until one opened.

**Alice Aries**

## Matthew Bell discovers how television benefits from becoming more sustainable

**C**utting a programme's carbon footprint can save producers thousands of pounds – and at the same time help the environment. This was the “win-win” message that Aaron Matthews – project manager at Albert, television's sustainability initiative – brought to an RTS London event, chaired by Muki Kuhlman, at the end of March.

Matthews explained that Albert certification – demonstrated by a logo displayed on a programme's end credits – is proof that a “production has implemented sustainability best practice”.

Certification brings a reduction of, on average, 10%–15% in a show's carbon footprint, saving £6,000 in energy and other costs. “On bigger production budgets, such as in a drama, you might save £50,000 to £60,000,” he said.

Albert's certification scheme promotes greener production by rewarding programmes for implementing sustainable working practices and cutting their carbon footprint.

Last year's *Peaky Blinders*, which achieved a top-rated, three-star Albert rating, was the greenest to date. To reduce its carbon footprint, the BBC Two gangster series used LED lighting in the studio and on location, worked with local crew to reduce travel, and hired props and costumes.

The TV industry is not one of the worst environmental offenders. “We're not that



BBC

# Albert's greener future

terrible – we're not the aviation industry, we're not putting diesel in rivers or acid in fields,” said Matthews.

But TV has a few areas where it could focus its efforts. “We use a huge amount of data,” he added.

**IN A DRAMA  
YOU MIGHT  
SAVE £50,000  
TO £60,000**

“We have large buildings that are very energy-intensive; for drama and comedy productions, we're physically building sets.”

And, modern ways of watching TV are less green. “The best way you can get your content to your audience is beaming it from a Crystal Palace-style antenna and getting everyone to watch it at the same time,” suggested Matthews.

“The worst thing we can do is to encourage people to watch it through the internet and on [mobile] devices – that pretty much increases the carbon footprint fivefold.”

One hour of TV produces, on average, 12.9 tonnes of carbon dioxide, a figure that includes gas generated by studio power, travel, hotels and catering. “For every tonne of CO<sub>2</sub> that we put into the atmosphere, we lose three cubic metres of Arctic sea ice,” argued Matthews.

At broadcasters, including the BBC, Channel 4, ITV and Sky, producers are required to calculate their carbon footprint. “The information is most important to the programme-makers – the people who [decide] which suppliers to use and who can implement changes,” he said.

TV's greenest programmes are multi-day events such as Wimbledon or Glastonbury, which give many hours of viewing relative to the production process; the least

green, ironically, are the landmark natural-history productions, such as *Blue Planet II*, which warn of the damage that man-made climate change is wreaking.

Originally, Albert was a carbon calculator created by the BBC, but the initiative has grown. Now, it is managed by Bafta's Albert consortium, which is composed of 14 of the UK's largest broadcasters and producers. It provides TV and film with the advice and tools to become more sustainable.

But broadcasters can also spread the green message on screen, argued Matthews. “*EastEnders*, *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale* have integrated sustainability storylines into the programme editorial,” he said. “The continuing dramas understand well the impact they have on society. Normalising [green behaviour] on screen is probably the most significant thing that they can do to reduce the overall carbon footprint.” ■

# Online TV: how to build a channel



Miss Holland

BBC

**London Centre** RTS London's mid-April event examined how new channels can make a splash in the online video space. Chaired by CNBC business presenter Nadine Dereza, "Online TV – not just Netflix" boasted a panel of: Lawrence Elman, co-founder of subscription channel Docsville; Tom

Clifford, CEO of History Hit; and online comic Eline Van Der Velden, who has made the jump to terrestrial TV via BBC Three's *Miss Holland*.

Van Der Velden discussed her experience making comedy for YouTube and other online platforms. She set up a production company to make short-form content,

which she said has more appeal to those watching on handheld devices. But she missed the feedback from the broadcast TV commission process: "It can be so helpful getting creative feedback from people who know what they're talking about."

Making short-form content to show on YouTube was difficult to fund from the platform's ad-revenue system alone – so she pursued the route of direct commissions from broadcasters.

Lawrence Elman gave much of the credit for Docsville to co-founder Nick Fraser, who set up and oversaw the BBC's feature documentary strand, *Storyville*. "Many smaller broadcasters around the world don't have the budgets to fund major documentaries," he explained. "Nick's idea was for a 'coalition of the willing' to get together behind a slate of original, full-length feature docs, that no one broadcaster could afford on their own."

When the BBC cut *Storyville's* budget in half, but still

wanted the same number of films, Elman and Fraser decided to launch Docsville.

"The hardest thing about doing an online channel is cutting through the noise to find your audience. You do need to keep coming up with extraordinary content – and keep innovating. Four weeks after launching on Amazon, we'd doubled our subs," said Elman.

Tom Clifford's partner in History Hit is TV historian Dan Snow. They began with an audio podcast, *Dan Snow's History Hit*, in which Snow interviewed TV historians on deeper aspects of their work that didn't make it into their TV shows.

This proved so successful that they extended it to video interviews about programmes that History Hit had licensed from the original broadcaster. Having built up a community of subscribers, from this, History Hit can now invest in new programming, mining history in more depth than on mainstream channels.

**Nick Radlo**

## Belfast season a 'huge success'

**Northern Ireland** RTS Futures Northern Ireland has completed a successful season of film and TV workshops run in conjunction with Queen's University Belfast.

Alleycats head of production Judy Wilson kicked off the season with a session called "How to manage a production". Over nearly five years at the indie, she has worked on many projects, including the BBC NI/RTÉ documentary, *How to Defuse a Bomb: The Project Children Story*.

Ryan Kernaghan, director of photography on revenge thriller *Bad Day for the Cut*, offered a crash course in camera and lighting techniques, explaining to the students in the audience how they should prepare for a shoot.

BBC Writers Room development producer Keith Martin and writer/director Stephen Mullan gave a workshop on screenwriting. "Don't over-complicate – simple can still be original," advised Martin. "Keep description to a

minimum," added Mullan.

In "Shorts to features with Ryan Tohill", the director – whose films, made with his brother, Andy, include the short *Insulin* and the full-length thriller *The Dig* – talked about how he made the jump from shorts to feature films. "We wrote short films [about] what we thought NI Screen wanted to see, which was a mistake," he said. "Make what you want – it's all about finding your own voice."

The final workshop saw Brian Philip Davis (*Bad Day for the Cut*) discuss the art of editing and offer tips on using Avid Media Composer.

"Our film and TV workshop season was a huge success. It was fantastic to see such an influx of people keen to hear and learn about the creative industry in Northern Ireland," said RTS Futures Northern Ireland Chair Georgia Parkinson.

The workshops took place from 17 April to 1 May at Queen's University Belfast, apart from Kernaghan's session, which was presented at Acorn TV.

**Matthew Bell**

Students hoping to break into TV received top tips from two of the UK's most successful production companies, in Leeds at the end of April.

More than 150 students from 20 universities heard Lime Pictures' *Hollyoaks* production team and a panel from Leeds-based factual indie True North give two masterclasses.

Both panels stressed the importance of work experience placements as a way into the industry. True North development producer Eleanor Wight, editor Luke Rothery and *Hollyoaks* editor Jake Whiston were all snapped up as a result of successful placements.

True North boss Andrew Sheldon had a checklist: "Make sure there are no mistakes in your cover letter and CV, be prepared to talk about what you like on TV, do your homework about what we do and, when you come for interview, look nice! You need to make a good impression at that first meeting."

Lime Pictures' head of

*Hollyoaks*: made by Lime Pictures



## Masterclasses are a hit in Leeds

Channel 4

production Colette Chard added: "So many careers begin with work experience as a runner. If you get that opportunity, make sure you never sit down. Stay off your mobile and be as helpful as possible. People will remember you." Jake Whiston said that, in his experience, it was important to simply "turn up and be nice".

Students learned that, as

well as their degree studies, employers will expect them to have the initiative and passion to produce other work. True North head of production Carol McKenzie said: "You need to stand out from the crowd. There's an increasing amount of production in the North and my biggest challenge is finding the right people for the right job at the right time."

Both panels felt that the growing pressure to make programmes out of London would benefit graduates planning to work in the North. **Graeme Thompson**

**'How to get a job in TV' was produced by Helen Scott as part of the Creative Cities Convention, and hosted by the journalist and broadcaster Kirsty Wark, at Leeds College of Music.**

## Students share Plymouth prizes

The main awards at April's RTS Devon and Cornwall Student Television Awards were shared around the region's universities and colleges.

"We've had a terrific range of entries from the region's further and higher education institutions," said Devon and Cornwall Chair Kingsley Marshall. "The [judging] panel highlighted the prowess of the storytelling across factual and drama, and noted the high levels in all of the work."

The winners were announced at a ceremony, hosted by Cornwall-born director Nigel Cole (*Made In*

*Dagenham, Last Tango in Halifax*) at Plymouth University.

Students from the same university won the Animation award with *Metamorphose*, which the judges said was a "challenging and jarring film that kept its edge".

Thomas Kneebone's *Seen and Not Seen* won the Comedy and Entertainment prize. The Cornwall College student's film featured "a terrific concept, with great typography and layouts".

Plymouth College of Art student Rauri Cantelo took the Drama award. "*Bird* has a strong story, with a restraint to the performances which felt

believable," said the judges.

The "very moving" Factual winner from Falmouth University students, *Boi*, was set in the trans community. *This is What Depression Feels Like* (Plymouth Marjon University)

### RTS Devon and Cornwall student winners

**Animation - *Metamorphose*** - Dmitri Domoskanov and Calum Ruaidhri Clark, Plymouth University

**Comedy and Entertainment - *Seen and Not Seen*** - Thomas Kneebone, Cornwall College

**Drama - *Bird*** - Rauri Cantelo, Plymouth College of Art

**Factual - *Boi*** - Dionne Rayner, Laura Marr, Wesley Treveng, Bethan Fairbairn and Tom Snelling, Falmouth University

**Short Feature - *This Is What Depression Feels Like*** - Charlie Mason, Matt Christey,

won the Short Feature award. "It was lit superbly," said the judges, "well cut and the sound cleverly done."

Students from Falmouth University won three of the four Craft Production awards (Editing, Production Design and Sound). Plymouth Marjon University students took home the Camera prize.

**Matthew Bell**

Spencer Ellis and Ollie Hutchings-Smith, Plymouth Marjon University

**Craft Skills - Camera - *Disorder*** - Joe Trickey and Izzie Larché, Plymouth Marjon University

**Craft Skills - Editing - *Miss Malarkey's Lost Her Man*** - Mattias Tamar Gill, Megan Thompson, Alex Atkinson and Jude Lilley, Falmouth University

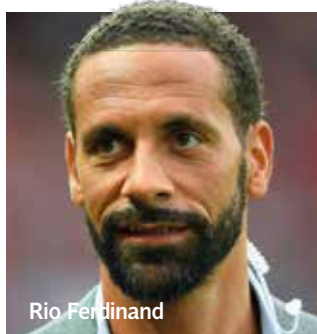
**Craft Skills - Production Design - *Siffre*** - Henry Crisp, Corey Jacob Woodward, William Roberts and Line Vanger, Falmouth University

**Craft Skills - Sound Design - *Our Daughter Is a Necromancer*** - Elitsa Nedyalkova, Falmouth University

## ONLINE at the RTS

■ Presenter Chris Packham has built a career around his passion for wildlife on shows such as *Springwatch*. Last year, he swapped the outdoors for a more personal project, *Asperger's and Me*, which received RTS and Bafta award nominations. He speaks to the RTS about why it was important to make the documentary and why celebrities should use their fame for good ([www.rts.org.uk/ChrisPackham](http://www.rts.org.uk/ChrisPackham)).

■ Channel 4 comedy-drama *The End of the F\*\*\*ing World* beat *The Crown* and *Ackley Bridge* to win the RTS Programme Award for best Drama Series. Based on Charles Forsman's graphic novel, the series was penned by actor and writer Charlie Covell. She speaks to the RTS about how writing for TV compares with acting, as well as discussing whether we can expect a second series ([www.rts.org.uk/CharlieCovell](http://www.rts.org.uk/CharlieCovell)).



BBC

Rio Ferdinand

■ The RTS Programme Award judges said that Single Documentary winner *Rio Ferdinand: Being Mum and Dad* was 'a profoundly brave personal journey told with incredible emotional honesty'. The film followed the ex-footballer as he helped himself and his children rebuild their lives after his wife's death. Executive producer Grant Best talks about how the project came about and the effect it has had on getting men to talk about grief ([www.rts.org.uk/GrantBest](http://www.rts.org.uk/GrantBest)).  
**Pippa Shawley**

# Pitch perfect

**RTS Futures** Developing an idea for TV is far from straightforward, as the participants at the sold-out event "From pitch to screen" discovered in late April.

"Development is anything that takes your show on a journey from a blank page of terrifying nothingness to the end of filming," explained Andy Cadman, executive producer of ITV2's *Love Island*.

Cadman was joined on the panel by All 4 commissioning editor Thom Gulseven and ITV2 scheduler Alex Wootten, who explained what they look for in a pitch. "There's no 'one size fits all,'" said Gulseven, who recommended getting to know a potential commissioner to find out what they liked. A good pitch should give the commissioner an idea of the programme, from its tone to the talent on it.

It was important to think about what slot the show might appear in, said Wootten. She suggested looking at the schedule to see how a new show could fit in.



From pitch to screen

Paul Hampartsoumian

Pitchers also needed to think beyond linear schedules, added Gulseven. Commissioners want to know how the idea would work across YouTube and social media, which extend a show's reach.

The panel was joined by Shine TV head of development Jonathan Meenagh, who demonstrated how the company successfully pitched *Hunted* to Channel 4.

It was tricky to sell, particularly as similar shows had failed in the past, he said. The team pitched it as a factual thriller, adding the idea of the surveillance state to avoid it being a simple cat and mouse chase. The clincher was

bringing on board experts from GCHQ as consultants.

Also joining the panel was Rosy Marshall-McCrae, from Scottish broadcaster STV, who guided the audience through making a taster tape (see box). It was important to know what the channel and the commissioner were after, to establish the tone and feel of the tape, she said.

Confidence was key to selling an idea, she explained, so pitchers should know what they were offering and why they believed it to be unique. A taster tape should get people hooked, so it needed to be distinctive and feature the best characters.

Armed with advice from the professionals, the audience was divided into teams, each guided by an industry expert, to develop a pitch for a new Channel 4 show.

Ideas ranged from a virtual-reality dating show to a format about setting up a cult. The winning pitch was for a series about troubled kids taking over a school run by disillusioned teachers.

**Pippa Shawley**

*'From pitch to screen' was held at Channel 4 on 25 April. It was chaired by Tom Read Wilson of Celebs Go Dating.*

## How to make a taster tape

STV head of factual development Rosy Marshall-McCrae said that, before starting work on a taster tape, programme-makers should answer these questions:

- Why do I want to make this programme?
- Is it relevant? Will the audience engage with the subject matter?
- Is it real? You shouldn't

have to dig too deep to find your contributors

- Is it interesting? Don't take your own word for it. Talk to other people about it
- Is it different? Are you offering a new angle? If not, look at how you inject something new, such as angles, cameras or graphics
- What's your style? Is it a rig, observational documentary or formatted show?



Gritty BBC One daytime drama *Moving On* – which won the Day-time prize at the RTS Programme Awards and celebrated its 50th episode earlier this year – came under the microscope at an RTS North West event in Salford in late March.

Created by Jimmy McGovern and made by Liverpool's LA Productions, the anthology drama series made its TV debut in 2009. Unlike most episodes, which are largely given to first-time writers, the 50th episode, *The Registrar*, was co-written by McGovern himself – with Megan Ellison, whose late father, Arthur Ellison, had been set to write it with her before his untimely death.

The landmark episode focuses on the collapsing marriage of a registrar, played by Samantha Bond, who discovers that her husband (Neil Morrissey), is having an affair. *Line of Duty* actor Adrian Dunbar took on directing duties.

Reflecting on the show's formula, executive producer Colin McKeown said: "We [tell] writers to write about a character who reaches a crisis point in his or her life and moves on. That is fundamentally what *Moving On* is about."

LA Productions' openness to new writing talent allows



*Moving On's* 50th episode, *The Registrar*

LA Productions

## Moving on past 50

this concept to flourish. The indie calls for script outlines and reads every one to find the freshest ideas. It's clearly a successful policy: of 28 *Moving On* writers, 15 were given their first commission by the series. And these new writers find themselves penning the words of some of the country's best-known actors, such as Jodhi May, Sinéad Cusack and John Simm.

The show's success in retaining long-time viewers

and finding new audiences has been achieved despite the tight budgets of daytime programming.

"You have to be inventive when there's less money: it comes down to less preparation, shorter filming and shorter editing; that creates great value," explained director Noreen Kershaw.

However, McKeown argued that the programme's daytime slot defined the drama. "If *Moving On* wasn't

on in the afternoon, it would be completely different. We were given the brief to work with afternoon drama, so we serve our audience the best way that we can," he said.

The show's producer, Donna Molloy, added: "We're broadcasting in the afternoon, so writers have to focus on telling a really good story – there's no sex, no violence, no being clever, just pure story."

**Laura FitzPatrick**

## Standard hails TV revolution

"SMPTE's ST2110 standard is the most important development to advance broadcast television since John Logie Baird went head to head with EMI-Marconi at the 1936 BBC trials in Alexandra Palace," claimed Tony Orme.

The research engineer and RTS Thames Valley Chair was talking to a packed audience in Reading in March at an

event organised jointly by the RTS centre and the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers. While the standard is exciting for engineers, argued Orme, the results of this work could open up new ways of working for programme-makers.

The death of synchronous digital interface (SDI) – the method of distributing video and audio in broadcast

stations across the world – has been widely predicted over the past 10 years. But only recently, with the uptake of internet protocol (IP), is this now a reality.

IP is taking the broadcast industry by storm, as infrastructure manufacturers plough money into R&D to improve data speeds, reliability and latency. SMPTE's ST2110 is the formal

specification that will allow IP to work efficiently in TV by separating the underlying hardware from the video, audio and metadata of the programming.

"Flexibility and scalability are the true reasons for moving to IP. Do not think you can go to a high-street computer shop or even a professional IT supplier and buy the type of infrastructure required to make an IP system work in a broadcast facility," argued Orme.

**Penny Westlake**

# OFF MESSAGE

Elsewhere in this issue of *Television* you will have seen a report of the super-human efforts involved in producing *Blue Planet II*. To minimise potential dangers, 50-page health and safety assessments are de rigueur for programme-makers filming in the oceans' depths, the RTS learnt.

Not that everything always runs smoothly. In one clip shown at the RTS event, "Diving beneath the waves: The making of *Blue Planet II*", a three-person crew was seen descending towards the seabed in a submersible.

The craft was somewhat cramped. But, as lunchtime approached, that was the least of the trio's worries. As they prepared to tuck in, they discovered that only two sandwich boxes had been packed for the journey. Not even Deliveroo does underwater deliveries.

Incidentally, Off Message was pleased to see that the panellists for the *Blue Planet II* session were served water in glasses, rather than in plastic containers. Michael Gove would have approved.

■ So, at last, a former culture secretary is occupying one of the four great offices of state. Congratulations to Sajid Javid, the new Home Secretary.

The bus conductor's son, who is a fan of *Star Trek*, has boldly gone where none of his Conservative or, indeed, Labour predecessors have.

Westminster watchers are predicting that the erstwhile investment banker might one day occupy No 10 Downing Street. Now that really would be something – the UK's first prime minister from an ethnic-minority background.

If an erstwhile television PR man can become PM, what's to prevent Javid from getting there, too?

■ By setting up new venture Wonderhood Studios, David Abraham aims to draw on his experience in advertising, as well as his years running broadcast companies.

The new studio will develop TV programming and branded campaigns under one roof.

He is well qualified for this ambitious enterprise to succeed. As well as leading Channel 4 for seven years, he also ran UKTV and occupied senior positions at Discovery in the UK and the US.

And, more than 20 years ago, he co-founded the creative agency St Luke's, having started his career at Benton & Bowles back in 1984.

An early aim at Wonderhood is to produce shows in factual and entertainment. No prize for guessing that Wonderhood hopes to sell programmes to Channel 4.

Off Message wishes him luck.

His pioneering use of analytics at Channel 4 showed that he is an industry leader who is often ahead of the curve.

■ It's good to know that a former RTS Student Television Award winner is going places. Step forward, Nick Rowland. He is making his feature directorial debut with *Calm with Horses*, a movie backed by Film4 and the Irish Film Board.

Nick is a former double RTS Student Award winner. He won in 2012 with his undergraduate film *Dancing in the Ashes*, and was a victor again, in 2016, with *Group B*, his post-graduate film at the National Film and Television School.

*Calm with Horses* stars Cosmo Jarvis, Barry Keoghan and Niamh Algar and is based on a story by Irish writer Colin Barrett. Filming started this month.

■ And, finally, Sky News must be congratulated for stealing a march on rivals with its incisive coverage of Amber Rudd's resignation.

While some better resourced competitors appeared caught in the headlights by the breaking story, Sky News's political editor, Faisal Islam, gave viewers an assured analysis of the implications flowing from the Home Secretary's decision to quit.

Also impressive was how Sky News quickly began reporting the social-media reaction to Rudd's exit.



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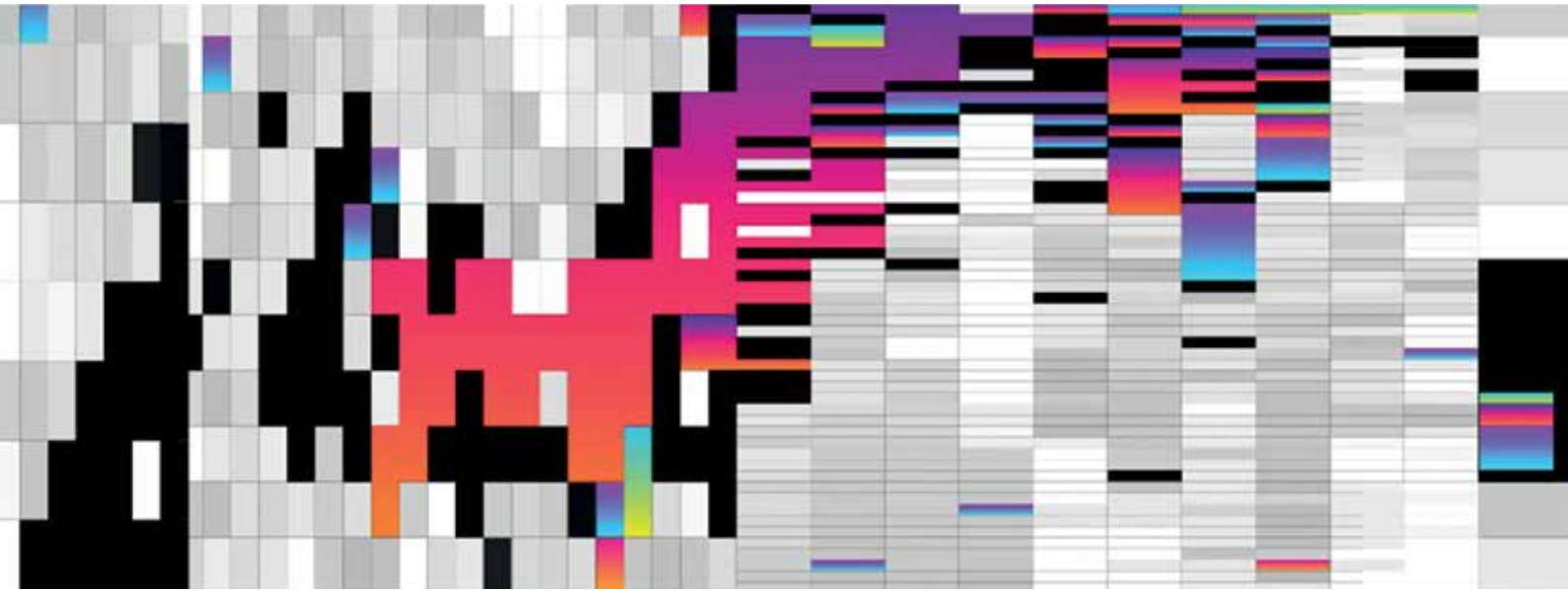
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