

September 2023

# Television



**Top Boy's legacy**

# The Steve Hewlett Memorial Lecture 2023

14 September

**John Ryley** Editor in Chief Sky News (2006-2023) and **Lyse Doucet**  
Chief International Correspondent BBC News discuss the economic,  
political, safety and other pressures on UK network news



John Ryley



Lyse Doucet

6.00pm for a 6.30pm start

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

Booking: [www.rts.org.uk](http://www.rts.org.uk).

Tickets £15.00 / Student discounted tickets £5

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



## From the CEO



I'm thrilled that *Television* is back in print this month and we have an issue packed with good reads. Our cover story is Netflix's edgy London crime

drama *Top Boy*, which, as Shilpa Ganatra recounts, has helped to nurture some extraordinary black talent in front of and behind the camera.

Channel 4 Chief Executive Alex Mahon is chairing this year's RTS Cambridge Convention. She has worked tirelessly to shape what I know will be a memorable Cambridge. Inside, she talks to Steve

Clarke about the Convention and what it's been like piloting Channel 4 in the face of digital and political headwinds.

Few days go by without television news devoting some serious airtime to the Ukraine war. Simon Bucks examines how broadcast newsrooms have risen to that challenge, and the growing importance of open-source journalism in cutting through the fog of war. This month's TV diarist, Yelena Fedoreyko, a journalist at Ukrainian TV channel 1+1, gives us a salutary reminder of what it's like to experience the conflict directly.

We are looking forward to welcoming Lucy Frazer, Secretary of State for

Culture, Media and Sport to Cambridge. She has gained something of a fan club among industry stakeholders, as our profile of the minister makes clear. We have features on two other Cambridge speakers, Mike Fries, CEO of Liberty Global, and Chris Packham.

I hope to see many of you at the Convention. I can't guarantee the weather, but I can promise high-grade insights from industry leaders – and a few surprises.

Theresa Wise

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# STREAMING SOCIAL BIG SCARE MOBILE

## TOO MUCH TO WATCH

RTS Cambridge Convention 2023  
20 - 21 September

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### Chaired by:

Alex Mahon, CEO, Channel 4

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Grace Boswood, Technology Director, Channel 4

Charlie Collier, President, Roku Media

Verica Djurdjevic, Chief Revenue Officer, Channel 4

Claire Enders, CEO, Enders Analysis

Angelos Frangopoulos, CEO, GB News

The Rt Hon Lucy Frazer KC MP, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport

Mike Fries, CEO and Vice Chairman, Liberty Global

Andrew Georgiou, President & MD, Warner Bros. Discovery UK & Ireland and Warner Bros. Discovery Sports Europe

Krishnan Guru-Murthy, Main Anchor from the Channel 4 News Studio in London

Ronan Harris, President EMEA, Snap

Bryan Lourd, Co-Chairman, Creative Artists Agency (CAA)

Piers Morgan, Broadcaster, Journalist, and Presenter, TalkTV

Rajiv Nathwani, Senior Director, Marketing, Netflix UK/IE/IL

Chris Packham, Naturalist, Broadcaster, and Environmental Campaigner

Simon Pitts, CEO, STV Group

Jordan Schwarzenberger, Co-Founder, Arcade Media, The Sidemen

Shay Segev, CEO, DAZN

Evan Shapiro, Media Cartographer

### Returning speakers:

Tim Davie, Director-General, BBC

Maria Kyriacou, President, Broadcast & Studios, International Markets, Paramount

Carolyn McCall, CEO, ITV

Dana Strong, Group CEO, Sky

Stephen Van Rooyen, CEO, Sky UK & Ireland and Chief Commercial Officer, Sky Group

# TV diary



## In the wake of Russia's 2022 invasion, Ukrainian journalist Yelena Fedoreyko had to fit her life into two suitcases

I overslept the beginning of the invasion on 24 February. The evening before, I was at the cinema alone: my nervous friend had declined, saying, "Let's meet after the war!" Around midnight, four hours before the attack, I finished writing a story about Hollywood movie *Dog*, starring Channing Tatum, which was due to be released in Ukraine.

Kyiv is a fairly large city and the initial explosions were far away. At 8:00am all social media feeds were filled with videos of Russian military columns. They had come to "liberate" us from ourselves, because if a Ukrainian doesn't consider themselves Russian, they're labelled a Nazi. While I thought about how to fit my whole life into two suitcases, a massive rocket fell at the crossroads, not far from my flat. Luckily, it didn't explode.

■ On 28 February, I started work again. Journalists, directors and video editors from channel 1+1's morning team formed a group called the Fighting Pluses. With a team of translators, we produced videos for YouTube to tell the world what was happening in Ukraine. In the first 106 days of war, we made 172 episodes in nine languages.

Working was difficult. We were in different parts of the country, hiding in basements during air raids. War is a nightmare that is hard to comprehend. My mind was overwhelmed by thoughts of the Russian military killing, raping, torturing and destroying my homeland.

■ I returned from the horrors of war to producing entertainment content on 28 March. Watching the Oscars

ceremony in a basement was surreal. Even more surreal was discussing the Will Smith-Chris Rock slapping incident on air in the morning. But at that point, we already understood that the audience needed distraction from the war.

My job is to write film reviews but, for more than two months after the invasion, I couldn't – I didn't want to watch movies. I received many messages from viewers sharing similar feelings. Cinema has the power of escapism, but it is limited. You can't immerse yourself in fiction when your own life is falling apart.

■ Although many Ukrainians were not in the mood for movies in the first months of the war, public support from celebrities was crucial. Photos and videos from the likes of Sean Penn, Ben Stiller and Angelina Jolie, who visited Ukraine, spread

rapidly on social media. Benedict Cumberbatch, already beloved from *Sherlock*, became an idol after stating he would host a Ukrainian family. Michael Douglas was particularly inspiring during a press junket in London.

■ Cinemas in Ukraine reopened in late May 2022. At first, audiences were tiny – I was the only person watching *Top Gun: Maverick*. Tom Cruise's stunts didn't seem so impressive in comparison with the hundreds of stories of real bravery and self-sacrifice on the battlefield. A year later, and releases such as *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* are attracting hundreds of viewers. Film showings stop during air raids and viewers have to go to shelters – but more and more moviegoers ask for films not to be interrupted.

■ Many of my colleagues who were once journalists, directors and producers are now on the frontline. Sometimes, when I write that I'm in Kyiv and want to meet, some reply, "Sorry, I can't. I'm in a trench near Bakhmut."

I've been living in London for about a year, working remotely. I miss the studio, make-up room, camera operators and newsroom, everything that has been a big part of my life for so many years. Writing reviews can be done from anywhere, the problem is how to record them.

Soundproofing is needed, so an old wardrobe comes to the rescue. When I hide there and read something aloud, friends joke that now I'm working from Narnia.

*Yelena Fedoreyko is a journalist at Ukrainian TV channel 1+1.*

# COMFORT CLASSIC

**Matthew Bell** celebrates the 60-year reign of the last of the Time Lords

**S**ixty years ago this November, a day after the assassination of John F Kennedy, William Hartnell stepped out of the Tardis and into the Stone Age in the very first *Doctor Who* story, *An Unearthly Child*.

Ratings were disappointing for a Saturday tea-time slot; the BBC's new sci-fi show attracted an average audience of 6 million over its four-part run. Reviews were mixed, too: "There was little to thrill [and the] wigs and furry pelts and clubs were all ludicrous," sniffed *The Guardian*.

Thank heavens for the Daleks, the Doctor's most-feared adversaries, who made their appearance – the first of 100-plus – in the next story, *The Dead Planet*. Writer Terry Nation based the mobile mutants on the Nazis, conceiving them as an authoritarian species dedicated to imposing racial purity, although this subtlety may have been lost on the many children hiding behind the sofa whenever the Daleks trundled on to the screen threatening to exterminate all and sundry.

Over the course of a seven-part story, audiences grew, topping 10 million for the finale. Sydney Newman, then BBC Head of Drama, noted ruefully: "I didn't want any bug-eyed monsters and the Dalek is what made *Doctor Who*."

Doctors regenerated – Patrick Troughton, Jon Pertwee and Tom Baker – and new companions, most notably the fondly remembered Sarah-Jane Smith (Elisabeth Sladen), accompanied them through space and time.

For British kids, *Doctor Who* became a TV rite of passage. Everyone has their own Doctor, sometimes more than one – mine were suave action man Pertwee and Baker, known for his long scarf and penchant for jelly babies, and a perennial choice among fans as the best Doctor.

If you have children, you get to live it all over again. I was lucky enough to be invited to the launch of the BBC's



# Doctor Who

BBC

# Ear candy

reboot of the show, where the ever-kind Russell T Davies, towering over my tiny daughter, patiently answered her question about how to become a writer. But, like the Doctor, I have jumped forward in time.

Tom Baker travelled the galaxy during peak *Who*; his span of seven series the longest of all the Time Lords.

Then, the show gradually lost its way. The new Doctor, the youthful Peter Davison, who also remains a fan favourite, left, citing poor writing.

His successor, Colin Baker, who brought a darker hue to the role, was fired and then, with Sylvester McCoy installed as his replacement, *Doctor Who* was scheduled against *Coronation Street* on a Monday night. You'd almost think someone at the BBC hated it.

And they did. Years later, then-BBC One Controller Michael Grade derided it as "horrible, awful... a little show for a few pointy-head *Doctor Who* fans".

The show limped on and actually lasted longer than Grade, who had jumped ship to Channel 4 by the time the BBC rested *Doctor Who* in 1989. And that was that until long-term fan Russell T Davies came to the rescue in 2005.

With Christopher Eccleston as the Doctor and Billie Piper as Rose, his companion, and superlative writing, the show underwent a resurrection rather than the usual regeneration. David Tennant, Matt Smith and Peter Capaldi followed, with *Doctor Who* scripter Steven Moffat taking over from Davies as showrunner. It was a golden era for the show.

Jodie Whittaker became the first female Doctor and *Broadchurch* writer Chris Chibnall replaced Moffat. Whittaker was good, the writing and plotting less so. Fortunately, as the series closes in on 900 episodes, Davies is back pulling the levers. As is Tennant's Doctor, with Catherine Tate as his companion, Donna, in three special episodes marking *Doctor Who*'s 60th anniversary in November. *Sex Education*'s Ncuti Gatwa becomes the 15th Doctor at Christmas.

And, apparently, there will be Daleks. All together, now: EX-TER-MIN-ATE! ■

***Doctor Who, post-2005, is on BBC iPlayer. BritBox has earlier episodes.***



Hosts Catherine Whitaker, David Law and Matt Roberts

The Tennis Podcast

## The Tennis Podcast

If you, too, were swept away by the turning tides of tennis this summer, your first port of call should be *The Tennis Podcast*.

For anyone living under a rock: a 20-year-old Spanish phenomenon named Carlos Alcaraz somehow came back from a set down in the Wimbledon men's final to defeat Novak Djokovic, who was all set to equal the now-retired Roger Federer's record of eight titles on the hallowed grass.

The cliché of the day was "the changing of the guard", as Federer, Djokovic and another elder, Rafael Nadal, had long resembled a three-headed beast guarding the gates of the grand slams.

Elsewhere at the All England Club, however, another Big Three were operating at the peak of their (podcasting) powers. With its rigorous but infrequently fun analysis, and a whole host of special guests, *The Tennis Podcast* has become so popular that its charming hosts, Catherine Whitaker, David Law and Matt Roberts, streamed their daily episodes live for the first time at this year's tournament.

It meant that they were perfectly poised to capture the seismic moment

with a post-match play-by-play, or what Whitaker referred to as a "group talking-therapy session". There was Roberts with his typically telling stat: in grand slams, Djokovic had won 104 matches in a row after winning the first set.

There was psychoanalysis of both players (Law noting Djokovic's frustration with the wind in that pivotal second set, which he lost) and their boxes (Whittaker praising Alcaraz's for not "projecting" any stress throughout).

But it was Roberts who best summed up Alcaraz's freakishly mature genius, recognising that true excellence in tennis meets at the intersection of resilience and technique, or "the right side of stubbornness". He recalls that, when serving for the championship, Alcaraz failed a drop shot (his signature) on the first point. But, far from wavering and changing his game, he won the very next with a glorious drop-shot-lob combo.

I'm new to both tennis and the podcast, but it is this passionate translation of the finer details of a sport on the brink of upheaval that will keep me and many others coming back. ■

**Harry Bennett**

# WORKING LIVES

## Business affairs



**Gwenda Carnie** has the business side of television covered as Media and Content Business Affairs Director at Industry Media. She deals with everything from book rights to script deals, development, broadcaster agreements, talent negotiations, financing and distribution. Carnie started out as a lawyer at a City law firm, but had her head turned during a secondment to MTV.

### What does the job involve?

Essentially, it's deal making: helping two sides agree commercial terms. In development, I could be taking out options on books, negotiating with scriptwriters' agents, or making agreements with co-producers, broadcasters or distributors who are funding a series.

When a show is commissioned, I could be negotiating with director, producer and talent agents, or advising on copyright or clearance issues with location owners.

My job also involves drafting contracts and giving advice on copyright and risk-assessment.

### Do you need a legal background?

I'm legally trained, but you don't have to be – some of the most amazing deal-makers I know are not lawyers. You have to know your way around a contract but that can be picked up along the way. A very senior legal partner once told me there's not much law in the law – and that's true! But sometimes it's comforting to know that you can call on your legal training.

### Who do business affairs specialists work for?

Often for broadcasters – I've worked for three: MTV, BBC Wales and S4C. Industry Media has a range of clients, including TV and film production companies in all genres (drama, children's, factual, entertainment and animation), talent and literary agents and some broadcast platforms.

### What was your route into business affairs?

I knew I wanted to work in either music or TV law. I did a French degree and studied French cinema, which I

loved. But, coming from a big family in South Wales, I knew very early on that I'd need financial security. Intellectual property really interested me and so I converted to law with the help of sponsorship from a big City law firm.

I moved to London and worked for what is now Reed Smith, a law firm that acted corporately for the BBC and MTV. I was seconded to MTV and found that I enjoyed that environment more. I liked the more relaxed atmosphere of working alongside production teams.

### What was your first job inside TV?

I moved back to Cardiff and was a general commercial lawyer for a while before a job came up in business affairs at BBC Wales.

I worked in radio and TV [production and commissioning] and online, across all the genres, for a decade. That's really where I cut my teeth in TV. I learnt a lot about TV production, management – and politics! – and saw a lot of change.

### How has your career developed?

After the BBC role, I freelanced for a



while, taking a maternity cover position at S4C and freelance roles at Lawyers on Demand and Wiggin.

While most business affairs specialists are found in big indies or broadcasters, there are quite a few working as consultants. I joined Industry Media as a consultant three years ago and very recently became a director and partner, alongside Huw Walters and Rosemary Klein, who are experienced and very supportive colleagues.

Our clients include Red Planet Pictures, which makes BBC One drama *Death in Paradise*, and Monumental Television (BBC One sitcom *Ghosts*).

### What skills do you need?

Language skills, because words are your tools, technical drafting skills and the ability to understand nuance. Empathy, too: you need to understand what's worrying your client and the other side. And then you have to be creative to find a solution that hopefully satisfies both.

Understanding the commercial side of TV production and development and the day-to-day issues that production teams encounter is also an essential part of the job. Industry Media prides itself on its ability to work closely with producers.

### Which people and departments do you work with closely?

Development teams, CEOs and MDs of production companies and, when a show goes into production, the line manager/production management team.

### What do you bring to work with you?

A "to do list", which I update meticulously – it's old school, written on paper. A notebook and pen, water and coffee. I've also got my two spaniels in my garden office.

### What's your biggest challenge?

Managing and being fair to yourself because the volume of work and demands can sometimes be overwhelming. You need to feel in control, even if you might not always be!

Today, we're dealing with two sizeable productions; I have a call with a development team; and I have to work on a writer's deal, co-production agreement and a book option.

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

The best is finding agreement where people thought there wasn't one, and

then making a deal. The worst is that you can't please everyone all the time.

### What programme do you remember most fondly?

When I was at BBC Wales, I worked on a BBC Two film, *A Home for Maisie*, about a remarkable couple who successfully adopted children and gave them fantastic lives.

They'd adopted a difficult child and

between London and the rest of the UK. There's still more to do, though: Wales is a massively untapped resource.

A lot of production has moved to Wales and elsewhere but often headquarters have stayed in London. It would help the ecology here and improve the prospects of sustainability if more of the corporate and business stuff came, too.



Gwenda Carnie

Industry Media

there were lots of duty of care issues about how to represent the child on screen. There was a tricky balance between maintaining the BBC's freedom to make the programme it wanted to make and ensuring that the child was properly protected.

Agreements with various agencies and contributors had to be negotiated, setting out clearly what could and could not be done. It was a fascinating and worthwhile programme to be involved with.

### How has the job changed?

With the growth of streaming, there are more commissioners now and the work is more international. The financing of programmes has also got more complicated and will get more so.

Personally, I've worked in Wales for most of my career and it's become much easier to be based outside London – the change in the past five to 10 years has been incredible.

Covid, awful though it was, accelerated the out-of-London movement and really helped bridge the gap

### What advice would you give to someone wanting to work in business affairs?

If you're going to take the legal route, which is the most obvious one, do your research and find some law firms with media clients. You could look for a start with a broadcaster or production company and learn on the job; finding a mentor with the right skills to teach you is like gold dust – if you find one, hang on to them!

### What ambitions do you still have?

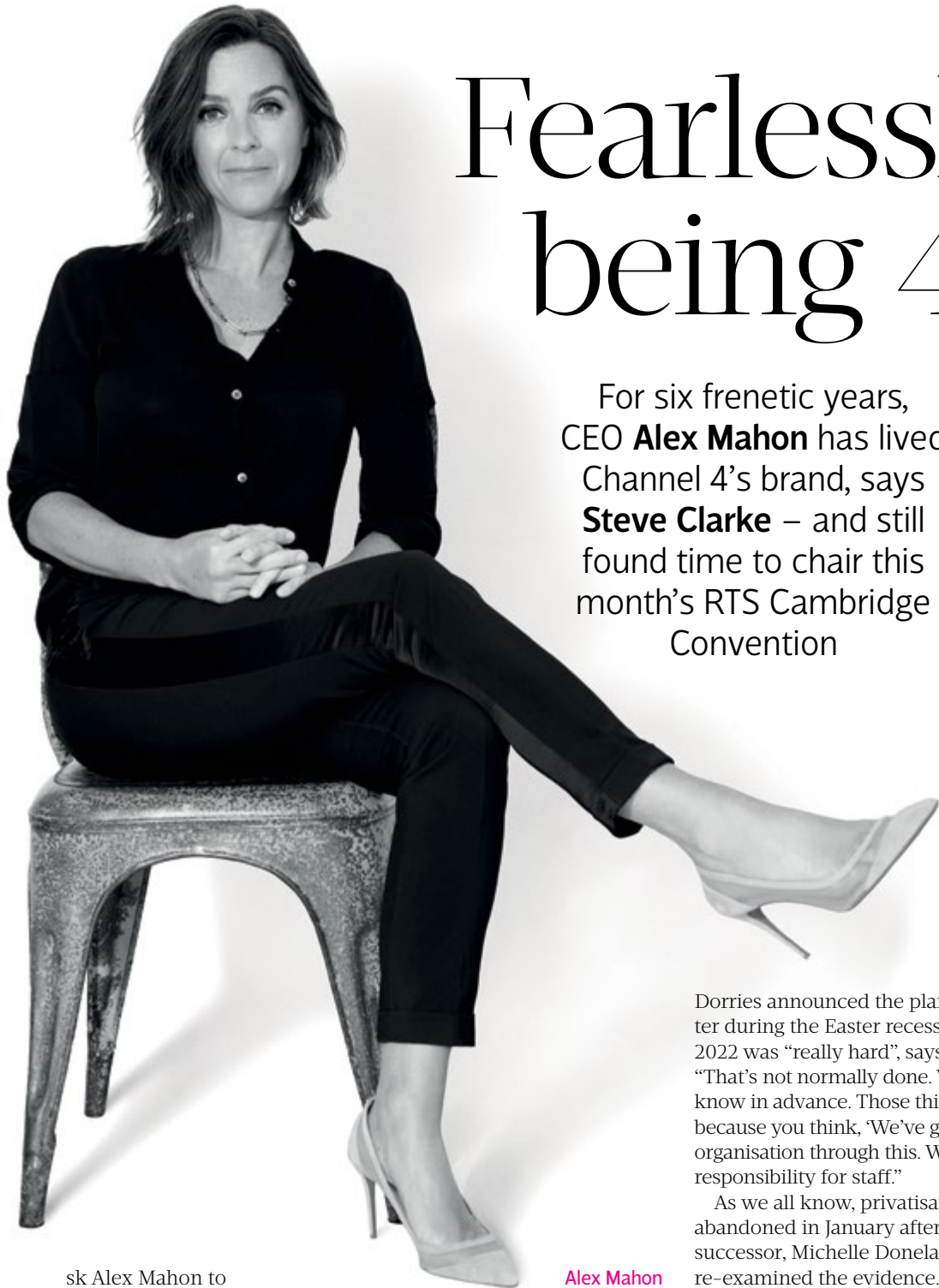
It's not always been a smooth path but, right now, I'm in a very good place. I'm curious about all aspects of the TV business and working at Industry Media means I meet lots of different people.

I'm still ambitious. I think, post-children, women can be – it's like having a second lease of life. I've been lucky to get where I am and I look around me in Wales and I think there is a responsibility to pass things on and give other people a chance. ■

Gwenda Carnie was interviewed by Matthew Bell.

# Fearlessly being 4

For six frenetic years, CEO **Alex Mahon** has lived Channel 4's brand, says **Steve Clarke** – and still found time to chair this month's RTS Cambridge Convention



Channel 4

Dorries announced the plan via Twitter during the Easter recess in April 2022 was “really hard”, says Mahon. “That’s not normally done. We didn’t know in advance. Those things are hard because you think, ‘We’ve got to get an organisation through this. We’ve got responsibility for staff.’”

As we all know, privatisation was abandoned in January after Dorries’ successor, Michelle Donelan, re-examined the evidence. Instead of putting Channel 4 on the market and potentially damaging Britain’s world-class independent production sector, Donelan hailed the broadcaster that turned 40 last November as “a British success story and a linchpin of our booming creative industries”.

There would be some reforms, most significantly a plan to set up an in-house production arm and grow the number of roles outside London but, thanks chiefly to Mahon’s careful pragmatism, Channel 4 would remain in public

**A**sk Alex Mahon to name the best bits about her job and without hesitation she says it’s when outstanding programmes receive the recognition they deserve. It could be a breakthrough comedy such as *Derry Girls* or Russell T Davies’s bittersweet *It’s a Sin* – or the recent Cannes Grand Prix winner, Film4’s *The Zone of Interest*, Jonathan Glazer’s German-language Holocaust film based on the Martin Amis novel.

“For me, at the heart of everything is delivering great shows. When we have something that cuts through and feels very Channel 4 and people react to it, I am always delighted,” she says. “That’s the ultimate high of running a channel, isn’t it?”

And the lows? “Privatisation was quite gruelling [because] government thinking about privatisation was not done in a ‘normal process’ way.” That the then-culture minister Nadine

Alex Mahon

ownership and retain its quintessentially British role as an *enfant terrible* that, on its day, can still make the UK's other public service broadcasters look staid. *Naked Attraction* anyone?

All this, plus the effort of setting up a new HQ in Leeds, with satellite offices in Bristol, Glasgow and Manchester, and steering the broadcaster through Covid has still seen Channel 4 hold its own commercially in a radically changing and fiercely competitive marketplace.

Mahon gives credit to her "incredible team" for enabling Channel 4 to come through these testing years in such good shape: "People care very deeply about the purpose of Channel 4. Compared with a normal company, they will do a huge amount.... The team is stunning. You don't want to work at Channel 4 unless you care deeply about its public service purpose and you feel an affinity with the brand being risky, noisy, mischievous, a bit of trouble."

This editorial approach, perhaps, played a part in the Johnson Government's determination to privatise the broadcaster. Remember that, in her 2019 MacTaggart lecture, Channel 4's then-Head of News and Current Affairs, Dorothy Byrne, accused the Prime Minister of being a liar. Three months later, during the general election campaign, *Channel 4 News* replaced Johnson with a block of ice when he declined to participate in a debate on global warming.

Does Mahon think the desire to privatise Channel 4 was politically motivated? "Some people have said that, but not me. The Government had every right to look at it. In the end, the right decision was reached."

Does she feel like her back has been permanently pressed against the proverbial wall these past six years? "I'd say that it has never felt relaxing. But, equally, every day at Channel 4 is a total joy. It's so interesting, whether it's watching our news or a show we did last week, *Gregg Wallace: The British Miracle Meat* [a provocative satire in which people cope with the cost of living crisis by trading human body parts as meat], or dealing with how to attract young people with public service sex education content.

"We ended up doing *Naked Education*. Loads of people make a fuss about it but it's exactly the right kind of show to be making if you want to address the issues facing 16-year-olds who've seen loads of porn but never seen a naked body?"

One could be forgiven for thinking ►



All pictures: Channel 4



Channel 4

## What Mahon still wants to achieve

'You can always have more creative success. That's a constant drumbeat but the next big thing for us is: what does the next five years look like digitally?'

'What do we have to change next in terms of how we're distributed, who

we partner with and what kind of content we have to continue to appeal to consumers.'

'We're at a very tricky time in the landscape, where public service content needs to be made stronger in terms of its visibility to UK consumers.'

## A day in the life of a CEO

'The first thing I do is look at my phone to check the press clips. If anything is going to knock my day sideways, it's what you weren't expecting to find in the 3:00am press clips, which I read about 7:00am. I then faff about getting my kids to school. There's a lot of shouting, getting them out of the door.'

'At work, it could be strategy or meeting an advertiser or talking to Ian [content chief Ian Katz] about shows or thinking about how we change the genre mix, given the impact of streaming.'

'Today, I've been in a streaming meeting for an hour, examining our unique reach for certain shows and considering which metrics and KPIs we need to think about. Also: what are the latest big SVOD shows? How is the tracking going for the launch of *Alone* next week? So it's a real mix.'

'Normally, I have quite a lot of things in the evenings – stakeholder events, screenings, maybe advertiser dinners.'

'It's a bit non-stop but never, ever boring. There are no boring meetings.'

## Boosting PSB to improve choice

'If we want public service television to be important to consumers, which I'm assuming we do... everyone wants the high-quality public service content we've got in Britain. We all want a strong BBC.'

'Even the BBC's detractors say they want a strong BBC. We want that

ecosystem, but the regulators and government need to understand that, to have that, it needs to be super easy for consumers to find. Every device that kids have seen in their lives has a YouTube logo on it. But they haven't had the equivalent for Channel 4, ITV or the BBC. Updating that is increasingly urgent.'

▶ that Mahon, who began work in the TV sector in 2000 at Luxembourg-based RTL Group (which once owned Channel 5), after working as a scientist, thrives on adversity.

How does she relax? "Drinking, watching television, gossiping," she says with perhaps a dash of irreverence before adding: "I do plenty of exercise because, for me, it's a de-stresser. I don't like exercise, but I find it relieves stress. I've got four kids so I'm quite busy at weekends." They are aged 16, 14, 13 and 11. "It's much easier than it was when they were four under-fives."

She continues: "I genuinely love watching television. I am quite excited today because the last episode of *Hijack* [the Apple TV+ thriller] is coming out. As soon as I finish work, I'm going to watch that."

On this Zoom link, when the call starts, I barely recognise her: her hair is pulled back and much of her face is obscured by an outsized pair of designer glasses that wouldn't look out of place on a 1940s Hollywood star.

A month earlier she co-hosted a press conference at Channel 4's Horseferry Road office to launch the broadcaster's annual report. It revealed some impressive stats concerning the switch to digital and diversifying revenues: 22% of the group's advertising income is now generated online; and only two-thirds of its total revenues come from linear advertising.

"It's hard to do, it's hard to change how broadcasters operate," Mahon notes. While some of her bigger rivals have struggled to nail the digital dollar, Channel 4 has proved itself adept at building a young, online audience.

To what does she attribute this success? "We started earlier – Channel 4 started streaming before anyone else. We were the first AVoD service in the UK and the first globally. We've always had a younger audience, so we faced these challenges earlier. I was convinced and adamant that Channel 4 had to go for digital growth as fast as possible. We've been on that journey for five years. We're probably the only broadcaster that prioritises digital over linear."

Building a public service streamer that resonates strongly with young people, albeit on a scale that is dwarfed by the US behemoths, is a considerable achievement. Digital youth brand Channel 4.0 launched last October and has since generated more than 47 million views, 73% coming from 13- to 24-year-olds. So much for this

demographic being immune to the charms of TV.

*Untold*, Channel 4's noisy, youth-focused current affairs strand launches its third series later this year.

The strategy is to focus on topics and areas and ways of making things that are interesting to young people and to tell stories from their perspective and avoid being judgemental. Mahon freely admits that content such as *The Secret World of Incels* and *Life After Love Island* aren't her idea of a fun night in

super-indie she ran from 2006, what did she learn from working alongside the company's founder, Elisabeth Murdoch? "Lis is amazing. What I learnt was to never be daunted by things looking difficult and to think big. Also, to search for... the people who are the best creatively and who are entrepreneurial. Lis embodied that mantra at Shine. She was always about, 'What can we do next?' and thinking big. She always wanted to seek out the best people and give them the tools to succeed."

risks, investigative risks, comedic risks. Our organisation is structured in a way to optimise our ability to deliver that. Many editorial organisations are structured in a way to reduce risk. We're the opposite of that. That's what makes it a very creative place."

As well as the day job, Mahon is chairing the RTS's Cambridge Convention, where she's aiming for some trademark Horseferry Road envelope pushing. "You have to work quite hard as chair to ensure you are being provocative and pioneering, and doing new sessions, because it can fall slightly into stasis."

She's been a Cambridge regular since 2001, when both John Malone and Rupert Murdoch cancelled following the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers. "It was a real shock to me to find all the British TV industry gathered in this one room for two days. I'd never been to Cambridge, so [missed] the whole going to Harry Potterville for the big meals [in King's], the establishment nature of it and the importance that people put on the discussions."

Did she stay in a college room? "I can't remember. Maybe I've blocked that out," Mahon laughs. "I thought how exciting and vibrant this industry is – to come to a conference like Cambridge where decisions are made in the room, and it's reported in the press."

"This year's theme, 'Too much to watch', is an opportunity for the industry to ask itself, 'What will we need to do to succeed in this crowded landscape?', which I don't see getting any less crowded." She adds: "Much like film, we're going to need to have more mastery of distribution and marketing. We already need to think through more carefully about titling and casting compared with traditional television."

"I think this raises quite significant questions about what PSB means to young people. What do the broadcasters' brands mean for them, particularly if they're under 18?"

"From a public service British industry perspective, what do we want that to mean? How prevalent do we want public service content to be? What does that mean from a legislative, prominence and distribution perspective?"

A lot to chew on, then. So, what does she hope delegates will take away from the convention? "The best Cambridges are when you go away feeling you've learnt something, and you've heard a fresh opinion or fresh perspective."

"You want to leave thinking, 'Oh, that's made me think differently.'" ■



Davina McCall: *Sex Myths and the Menopause*

Channel 4

watching TV but needs no reminding that they resonate with their intended audience.

She adds: "Long term, none of us, as public service broadcasters, are big enough individually to fight a Netflix or an Amazon or an Apple. So, you have to make your content relevant, purposeful and your brand noisy, so that it stands out." This has been Channel 4's mantra for decades, arguably the one constant at the broadcaster as leaders have come and gone.

Mahon is the first woman to run Channel 4. How would she describe her management style? "Am I the best person to answer that? You'd have to ask someone who works for me... What I try to do is to find excellent people and provide the conditions for them to be a success. And work out what my part is for each of them differently to help them to be able to deliver that."

People have described her to me as "pragmatic" – is that fair? "Yes, I'm pragmatic... I don't think that's untrue."

When she was at Shine, the

## 'THE BEST THING ABOUT CHANNEL 4... IS THAT IT IS SEEKING TO MAXIMISE EDITORIAL RISK'

Did she bring these attitudes with her to running Channel 4? "In my own way, but [with the hint of a grin] not necessarily with the money of the Murdochs. Yeah, we try and empower creative people and believe in big ideas. The best thing about Channel 4, and this is why it's different to other broadcasters, is that it is seeking to maximise editorial risk."

"We have an organisation that is structured – and some journalistic publications may be like this – to creatively innovate and to take editorial



Gang leaders Dushane (left, Ashley Walters) and Sully (centre, Kane Robinson) seeing to business

# Top Boy's legacy

It's no easy task to think of a programme that's done more for cutting-edge British drama than *Top Boy*. Having made its debut on Channel 4 in 2011 and running for two series before Netflix revived it for a further three, the gritty drama follows the drug gangs of London's fictional Summerhouse estate in Hackney with exemplary authenticity.

The series has helped nurture major stars such as Letitia Wright, Michaela Coel and Micheal Ward and served as a nursery for young talent behind the camera. And, crucially for disenfranchised audiences, it has reinforced the link between youth culture, music and mainstream television: revered artists such as Kano, Little Simz and Dave are all featured. Critics and awards juries have heaped praise on *Top Boy* – series 1 won the RTS Drama Serial award in 2012 and several commentators saw the show as British TV's equivalent of *The Wire*.

Sadly, all good things come to an end. The upcoming series of *Top Boy*

As the gangland drama reaches its finale, **Shilpa Ganatra** reveals how the series broke new ground in nurturing black talent

will be its last, no matter how much *Top Boy* enthusiasts – including Canadian rapper Drake, who campaigned for the Netflix revival – protest (Drake is an executive producer on the show).

Co-director William Stefan Smith says: "It's the British way. Historically, British shows end early. We don't push them into six or seven seasons."

It's especially apt because of the subject matter, says Jasmine Jobson, who stars as the gang's main female member, Jaq. "We're showing the public that there's only so far you can go. You can end up in prison, you can end up dead, but every top boy has to

come to a stop at some point. You don't see 60- or 70-year-old top boys, unless it's the mafia. So I feel like we're doing the right thing."

Across the five series of *Top Boy*, created and written by Ronan Bennett, we've seen gang leaders Dushane (Ashley Walters, formerly of *So Solid Crew*) and Sully (Kane Robinson, aka Kano) grapple with inside and outside threats to retain dominance of their patch. The finale finds more trouble at the top, in the form of an Irish contingent, played by Brian Gleeson and Oscar-nominated Barry Keoghan. At the same time, the younger generation of Summerhouse residents, including Stefan (Araloyin Oshunremi) and Aaron (Hope Ikpoku Jnr), come into their own.

Lead director Myriam Raja explains: "You can feel how Dushane and Sully have progressed and are getting older by how their scenes feel more stylised. Whereas, with the youngers, there's still an element of realism and grittiness."

To allow the actors the freedom to improvise – a key element in giving *Top*

Boy its freshness – she kept plans loose. “That meant not having too much lighting on set, so the camera could just move with them. It was important because some of the actors, especially the young ones, are non-actors, so it might be their first time on set.”

While the plot of the finale was kept under wraps – most of the crew didn’t see the scripts until shooting day – Smith has continued to push the envelope. He recalls the opening two-and-a-half-minute scene of the final episode: “I wanted it to be one shot, but it was a hard ask. There were around 150 background artists involved, the camera was moving constantly, we had BMX riders and stunt drivers, so we had to make sure they didn’t hit the cameras or non-stunt people. We [also] had a limited supply of a crucial prop. And it had to look real.

“We tried to do it twice, and we broke the prop twice. We had one more throw of the dice, so we asked ourselves if we could break up the scenes to be safe. But we were so excited, we gave it one more try and we pulled it off. The entire crew was so happy. In the end, I was thankful I didn’t compromise, even if it was scary.”

Smith, winner of the Director: Fiction award from Bafta for series 4 earlier this year, describes the crew as “the most diverse I’ve ever worked with”, adding that “the production assistants were black, the gaffer was black, the costume designer was black. The head of make-up was black”.

Raja, who hails from a working-class Pakistani background, began on *Top Boy* as part of the show’s mentee scheme after graduating from the National Film and Television School, and winning an RTS Student Television Award for *Tehzeeb*, her graduation short from Bournemouth Arts University.

She shadowed director Aneil Karia during the third series. “That was important because it was my first time stepping on to a TV set. I got to be a sponge and watch everything happen,” she says. After the experience, she stayed in touch with the producers and asked them for more work until she was given an episode to direct. And then another four.

“The crew is diverse and young, and some of the crew members on this season had also progressed in their own departments. That meant, when I stepped on set, there was no feeling of intimidation, of whether I deserved to be in that space,” adds Raja.

On-screen representation is, of course, key to *Top Boy*’s success. The characters have been the viewers’ window into social-housing life, street lingo included (a bit of “food”, anyone?). And those who’ve lived it see themselves in the show.

*Top Boy* made a big impact when Channel 4 first aired it in November 2011. It helped that its four episodes were shown on consecutive nights. Critics seized on its originality and a second season was ordered quickly.

When the series resurfaced on Netflix, Drake said: “There are a lot of parallels

*Boy*, it is that it unhelpfully perpetuates a stereotype conflating black people, social housing, gangs and violence. Jobson denies the charge: “We’re drilling very deep, and humanising these characters,” she says. “Look at Jamie, who has to act as a dad to his two younger siblings. Or Jaq: she has to keep a roof over her and her sister’s heads. If they had a choice, they would not do the stuff we’re portraying. If anything, by humanising them, we’re removing the stereotype.”

While *Top Boy* is about to take its last bow, its legacy is clear. “There’s the



Jaq (Jasmine Jobson) in *Top Boy*

## ‘THERE’S THE OLD ARGUMENT THAT THERE’S NOT ENOUGH BLACK TALENT IN THE SCREEN INDUSTRY. WELL, THERE IS. WE’VE SEEN IT’

between Toronto and London – we don’t have the same accent, obviously, but we do speak the same. I felt super connected right away.”

Because of the world they depict, storylines tackle such issues as mental health, gentrification, deportation, racism and gang violence. .

If there is a criticism that dogs *Top*

old argument that there’s not enough black talent in the screen industry. Well, there is. We’ve seen it,” says Smith. “*Top Boy* took risks on people, and now the crew have gone on to work on things such as *Bob Marley: One Love*, *Dreaming Whilst Black*, *Queenie*, *Champion* and *Grime Kids*.”

Raja is working on two feature films, while Jobson will soon return to our screens as the lead in the ITV thriller *Platform 7*. Ashley Walters moves behind the camera, co-directing Stephen Knight’s Disney+ series *A Thousand Blows*. Kano is starring in Netflix’s dystopian drama *The Kitchen*, penned by *Get Out* star Daniel Kaluuya. And that’s just the tip of the iceberg.

“The real thing that *Top Boy* should be praised for is allowing its creatives to work on something we believe in,” says Smith. “That’s why I’m not so sad about *Top Boy* calling time, because it’s opened up the doors for so much more.” ■

**The final series of *Top Boy* is available on Netflix from 7 September.**



# A man for our times

He is often called the new David Attenborough but **Caroline Frost** finds there is a lot more to **Chris Packham** than being a naturalist and eco campaigner

**C**hris Packham is freshly angry. On the afternoon we speak, he has spent the last few hours protesting at the Government's announcement of 100-plus new North Sea oil and gas drilling licences, a policy he describes as "a dark day for life on earth".

While he has vehemently criticised the plans, Packham stops short of joining in the personal attacks on the Prime Minister. He explains: "It would be very tempting for me to send a tweet to Rishi Sunak saying I'm not too impressed with his announcement today. But I don't attack individuals, I will question government policy. I'm

constantly on the receiving end of those sorts of personal attacks. They're not helpful. Rishi Sunak is symbolic, he's the leader of the moment, the problems we're facing are not solely his to solve."

Like some other BBC luminaries not shy of speaking out on political matters, Packham walks the tightrope between obeying his conscience and adhering to the broadcaster's impartiality requirements. How does he manage to navigate this?

"I'm generous and polite about when and how I campaign," he begins with his customary thoroughness. "I work in constant contact with the BBC. Whenever there's a source of conflict, real or imagined, coming up, I let them

know so they're not caught off guard by the fact that I'm going to do or say something that could be perceived as a conflict of interest.

"I'm a fan of the BBC's impartiality, so I work to protect it. I'm conscious of that and do everything I can not to come into conflict. Every now and again, some mischief is made that breaks through" – he cites the "right-wing press" as well as his many trolls on social media – "or sometimes I make a mistake, but relatively few and I'm quite practised.

"It's about communication and mutual understanding. Plus, I focus my campaigning solely on environmental issues. I campaigned vociferously



against HS2, but on environmental grounds. There are plenty of other grounds to protest, but I don't talk about those aspects, I stick to one field."

For producer Joe Myerscough, who has worked with Packham on two recent series, *Chris and Meg's Wild Summer* (2021) and this year's *Inside Our Autistic Minds*, such passion is what he believes audiences want, even if it does cause the BBC a few headaches. "If you're making a programme about the environment, viewers want presenters who will fight for the environment. You want Jeremy Clarkson to care about cars, you want Chris Packham to care about badgers."

Packham has been talking about badgers on our screens for nearly 40 years, following his 1986 debut on *The Really Wild Show*, where his Billy Idol bleached tips and passion for nature made him a distinctive presence for the next decade. Michaela Strachan joined the team in 1993. She remembers being initially quite intimidated: "I didn't think he would like me. I'd come from *Wide Awake Club* and he was ex-punk. He liked The Clash, I liked Kylie Minogue. Amazingly, we hit it off. When you travel the world filming, you have life-changing experiences and they bind you. We would stay up late, have quite a lot to drink and an enormous laugh. He was quite a party animal.

"As the years have gone by, we've kept that bond. Chris isn't the easiest of people to have as a very good friend because he's complex, but the bond is still there."

Since those days of hard partying and hedgehogs, Packham has channelled his love and knowledge of our planet into hundreds of programmes. Many label him the natural successor to David Attenborough, a view given yet more credence with the new BBC Two blockbuster *Earth*, where his passion and authority for the subject matter – a guide to "five pivotal moments" in our planet's history – is much in evidence.

But there is more to Packham the broadcaster than nature films. In 2017, he turned the camera on himself, exploring his experience as a high-functioning person with autism in *Chris Packham: Asperger's and Me*, and this year saw him revisit the subject in the brilliant *Inside Our Autistic Minds*, a project he found both tiring and rewarding. "It's quite challenging. I'm trying to be an ambassador for autistic people, I'm trying to make a decent piece of TV,



Chris Packham in *Earth*

BBC

and manage myself. It's a three-way job. It was reaffirming. I got to think, 'It's not just me.'

"[Autism] can be isolating and lonely and meeting someone who totally gets it, the connection is there, which you don't get with neurotypical people. The overall mission was to give the audience a broader understanding of the aspects, both difficult and advantageous.

"The public response has been overwhelming. An enormous number of people have come up to me and said thank you, saying it had changed their perception of someone they knew." He laughs. "Nobody ever asks about *Springwatch*."

For the crew around him, too,

working with Packham has been an eye-opener. Myerscough is used to the presenter's requests to have breakfast alone, sit in the same seat in the car between shoots, and to dispense with the need for any chit-chat. "Chris has no interest in small talk and that's really refreshing," he tells me. "You'll phone him up and he'll just start talking about the thing in question – there's no time wasted."

Packham says such confidence has come only relatively recently, and certainly post-diagnosis. "I'm far more outward when it comes to working with people, what suits me and what will benefit them. My requests may seem trivial, but they'll soon come to ▶

Sir David Attenborough and Chris Packham in *Winterwatch*



BBC

► realise, sitting in the same seat in the car, being allowed to get on with my laptop and not partake in small talk, is the best way of getting Chris Packham to do a good job for them.”

For sure, broadcasters are queuing up to work with him, including Alf Lawrie, Head of Factual Entertainment at Channel 4, who commissioned *Is It Time to Break the Law?*, a documentary exploring the issues posed by the title’s question due to air this month.

For Lawrie, Packham was the natural choice to front such a piece: “He has a deep understanding of the natural world, which is increasingly getting entangled in politics. He’s someone who is fearless, a deep thinker, so that’s why we commissioned him.”

Inevitably, such a huge workload, while battling climate sceptics and managing his autism, takes its toll. Strachan admits she worries “about his mental health, and that he pushes it too far. I don’t know how he copes with the haters, he has people who absolutely worship him but also people who hate him. He gets fuelled by people who don’t like him and disagree. But he takes on such a lot and there’s no proper balance.”

Packham agrees he “no longer has the luxury of reading a novel”, but finds distraction in film – “I’ll watch sequences from *Pacific Rim* or *Transformers* with the sound down, the stories are terrible” – or any TV on art, including *Fake or Fortune?*: “I can be in the kitchen doing some work, and Fiona’s there with Philip Mould and they’re unravelling some story

## ‘I JUST DESPISE IT... I WOULD HAVE SPORT REMOVED FROM BBC NEWS’

where someone’s found a Picasso in their kitchen cupboard.”

A query into any love of sport, though, brings a swift shake of the head. “I just despise it, I’m afraid. The football World Cup went to Qatar and now players are moving to Saudi Arabia. The underlying principles of sport are noble, ancient, valuable, but

it’s all just got corrupt. If I had a magic wand and could change one thing, I would have sport removed from BBC News. It’s not news, and a disproportionate amount of time is given to the trivia of sport.

“All of these things are peripheral. If you want to watch *Match of the Day*, you can watch *Match of the Day*, but I don’t want my daily news reduced by the amount of time given to something essentially unimportant in the grand scheme of things.”

If Packham is in danger of saying goodbye as furious as when we said hello, solace is at hand. I ask about his dogs, Sid and Nancy – two black Miniature Poodles, in the tradition of his previous pooches, Itchy and Scratchy – and, immediately, he smiles.

“My greatest predictable joy is taking them for a walk in the wood. I call them my joy grenades because, every time I let them off the lead, they explode with joy. Sometimes they run and I just start laughing and smiling and crying. They’re so happy, it makes me happy.” ■

*Chris Packham will be speaking at the RTS Cambridge Convention.*



Channel 4 News International  
Editor Lindsey Hilsum  
interviewing on the front line

Channel 4

# The truth will out?

If we ever needed reminding that truth is the first casualty of war the conflict in Ukraine has supplied an abundance of misinformation and propaganda. War has also, wrote the historian AJP Taylor, just as reliably been the mother of invention for everything from battlefield hardware to advances in conflict journalism.

The evolution of war reporting can be traced from William Howard Russell's pioneering dispatches from Crimea for *The Times* to the use of the telegraph in the Franco-Prussian war, photographs and film in the First World War, on-the-spot radio broadcasts in the Second World War, television in Vietnam and rolling TV news in the Gulf wars, the Balkans and Afghanistan.

Now, Ukraine has added another milestone: Europe's first full-scale phone- and drone-camera war. Paradoxically, an old-style trench and artillery conflict has been dubbed "the first TikTok war".

"When I was first in the business, the coverage of anything was dependent on a camera crew getting there, so it was typically aftermath," says

As the Ukraine conflict reaches its 18-month mark, **Simon Bucks** talks to leading figures in news about how TV war reporting has been transformed

Jonathan Levy, Managing Director and Executive Editor at Sky News. "Now, your primary source of pictures of something happening is going to be someone recording it on their phone."

News bosses know that, while some combat video shot on camera phones comes from individuals at the scene, in Ukraine much is posted as propaganda by military and government agencies, Ukrainian as well as Russian.

"No one should approach any conflict thinking that, just because right is apparently on one side or another, they are therefore telling the truth. It doesn't suit anyone to tell the whole truth all the time," says Jonathan Munro, the BBC's Deputy Director of News. "So,

reaching firm conclusions about what's factually accurate is difficult. The key is to be honest with the audience about what we don't know."

"The Ukrainian government is extremely good at propaganda – as it should be, that's its job, any government at war has to be good at it," notes Lindsey Hilsum, the veteran *Channel 4 News International* Editor, who has reported extensively from Ukraine.

"We use that footage if we're not there. But you have to be very careful because, of course, if a Ukrainian unit has a bad day and loses a lot of people, it is not going to put out footage showing that. [Forces] put out footage that shows them having a good day."

"You find yourself publishing material by people who you wouldn't want to meet in real life," adds Mark Evans, Head of News at Enex, an association of the world's leading commercial TV news broadcasters. He cites the controversial Ukrainian Azov Brigade, a unit with many right-wing extremists, and, reputedly, a rich source of propaganda footage. "But, from a journalistic perspective, once you have satisfied yourself that something is genuinely what it says it is, it kind of doesn't matter." ►

► The tricky business of distinguishing real footage from disinformation has driven the rapid development of Osint, (open-source intelligence), the science of figuring out whether a video is what it claims to be. It's done by scouring databases, analysing metadata and matching skylines, backgrounds and terrain from genuine imagery, such as Google Earth.

"You need really sharp tools and clever people to make sure that the video that's floating around is not fake," says Levy. "Open-source journalism is crucial now. You couldn't run a newsroom without it."

"Open-source journalism is something that we're leaning into and the war was a catalyst for that," agrees Andrew Dagnell, the Editor of *ITV News*. He argues that every journalist should have Osint skills. "It's going to become more and more important in our day-to-day work."

Most UK newsrooms have Osint units, with much of their work focused on Ukraine war video. Only the BBC has given theirs a public brand name – Verify – and, with 60 people, it's no small enterprise.

"I have a problem with the phrase 'citizen journalists', because they're not journalists, but people who gather evidence on social media," says the BBC's Munro. "But the space in which social media video sits is [vast] and growing. More and more of the world's population can do this sort of stuff. If the BBC brand stands for anything, it's the pursuit of truth, and that means redoubling our efforts to verify, to check, to confirm."

News chiefs agree that this proliferation of social video is no substitute for their own correspondents' first-hand reports. All continue to dispatch people to the front line and their brave teams produce memorable pieces. The BBC maintains a permanent Kyiv bureau.

As the war reaches its 18-month mark, newsrooms have retreated from their initial blanket coverage, settling into a less frenetic rhythm. Despite that, broadcasters say that reporting



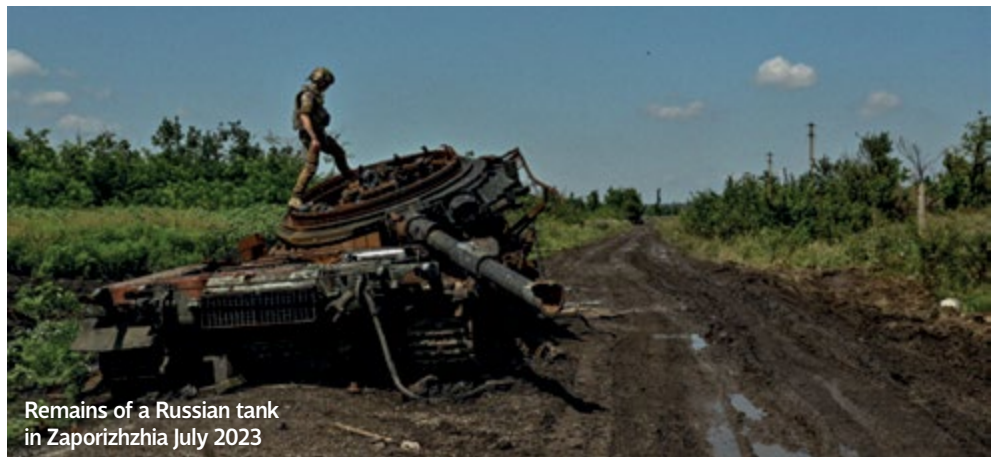
Sky correspondent  
Alex Rossi reporting  
in January 2023



Ukrainian drone footage  
of Russian incendiary  
shells falling on  
Bakhmut, May 2023



Ukrainian artillery near  
Bakhmut, November 2022



Remains of a Russian tank  
in Zaporizhzhia July 2023

## ‘OPEN-SOURCE JOURNALISM IS CRUCIAL NOW. YOU COULDN’T RUN A NEWSROOM WITHOUT IT’

Ukraine has, in some ways, become even harder.

Most boosted their security arrangements after Sky News’s Stuart Ramsay was wounded by gunfire when his team was attacked near Kyiv in March last year, and two Fox News journalists were killed a few days later. “After that, the security concerns got bigger,” says Rob Hodge, Deputy Foreign Editor of *Channel 4 News*. “We had to have two armoured cars to carry all of us plus a security adviser and a local journalist. It all makes sense from a safety perspective, but it adds to the logistics.”

Apart from the problems of getting around a vast country during a war, reporters say it has become more difficult to access the action. The Russians virtually never allow Western journalists to see their operations, and the Ukrainians have become more restrictive.

“At the beginning it was quite anarchic,” says the vastly experienced recipient of multiple RTS awards Alex Crawford, Special Correspondent at Sky News. “The Ukrainians were very much in flux, President Zelensky was living behind sandbags in his office. No one had quite got a handle on where all the journalists were, what they were doing, where they were going. Now, you have to have a press officer with you and, if you are minded to do without one, they’ll threaten to take away your accreditation or your fixer’s.”

As in all wars, reliable facts are hard to come by. Neither side reveals its casualty figures, so journalists have developed their own methods to establish them. Hilsum at *Channel 4 News* has used the simple device of counting fresh graves flying flags to indicate dead soldiers. The BBC and ITN have employed satellite imagery, and Sky’s Crawford worked with a forensic team using 3D scanners to recreate war crimes.

As an aside, Hilsum volunteers that her local producer has a winning formula for negotiating Ukrainian checkpoints. “She says I’m a very famous journalist. Not true, but anyway... second, I was a friend of the Queen. And

third, and this is always a clincher for some reason, I saw Gaddafi’s body with my own eyes.”

Hilsum says Ukraine is one of the few stories she has covered where being British helps, thanks to the UK Government’s continuing support for Ukraine’s war effort.

Helpful perhaps, but it raises a critical question for journalists. The former BBC reporter John Sweeney told *NewsXchange* recently: “There is no place for impartiality in coverage of Russia’s war on Ukraine.”

British public support for Ukraine has stayed consistently high, around 80% according to YouGov, although a fair number of countries remain neutral or disinterested.

On Russia’s border, by contrast, the situation is clear cut. “It’s a very common feeling that it could have been us,” explains Mika Mäkeläinen, a Finnish TV reporter. “There’s absolutely no question that Russia is entirely to blame, so it’s difficult for us to relate objectively to the situation.

“There’s a consensus that we can’t allow Russia to win: it would just embolden a dictatorship that would be a continuous threat to other democracies in Europe. We have a moral obligation to support Ukraine.”

For British broadcasters, bound by

## ‘THE KEY IS TO BE HONEST WITH THE AUDIENCE ABOUT WHAT WE DON’T KNOW’

regulation, it’s more complicated. “Our responsibility is for due impartiality,” says the BBC’s Munro. “What is the level of impartiality that is relevant to a circumstance or situation? If one country invades another country, our job is not to be balanced in a 50-50 way.”

When the Nova Kakhovka dam was blown up, Munro says many Ukrainians thought the BBC was too impartial: “It’s quite unlikely that the Russian account was true, but no BBC journalist or third-party source witnessed it. So, our job was to say why we didn’t think Russian claims were likely to be true.”

“We try, where possible, to cover atrocities on both sides,” confirms *ITV News*’s Dagnell. “But you’ve always got to be mindful of the war’s origins, the politics that started it. So, it’s very nuanced.”

“It’s not about saying one side is as bad or good as the other,” adds Levy at Sky. “But, if you’re witnessing a column of Russian tanks rolling towards Kyiv, as in the early days of the war, you show people that and it completely counters the Russian argument that it wasn’t an invasion.”

“It is a question I have asked myself,” admits Hilsum at *Channel 4 News*. “And maybe that’s the most important thing: to keep asking ourselves that question. And to try to make sure that we’re telling the truth about a war of aggression, where there is a clear aggressor, and there is a clear victim.”

Mäkeläinen says the existential threat posed by Russia makes it very easy to keep his viewers interested. Is the UK still equally hungry for Ukraine news? Absolutely, confirms *Channel 4 News*’s Rob Hodge: when something big happens, all news outlets see a spike in audience figures.

But, with the fighting grinding on, budgets straining and other big stories demanding coverage, editors agree that – while they remain committed to reporting Ukraine – they have become more selective about when and where to deploy. So, barring a dramatic turn of events, prepare to see fewer first-hand reports and more phone-camera footage. ■

**Lucy Frazer**, appointed Secretary of State at the DCMS in February, has a reputation as someone who likes to get things done. **Steve Clarke** reports

# The listening minister



John McVay, the Chief Executive of Pact, speaks for many in the TV sector when he urges Lucy Frazer, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport since February, to remain in her post for the foreseeable future. “My main plea is, ‘Can you stick around a bit, please,’” he said.

Frazer is, of course, the 12th politician to occupy the role of culture secretary in 13 years – and her tenure comes at a pivotal time for the sector. The much-anticipated Media Bill, held back by the controversy over privatising Channel 4, is now not expected to receive its first legislative reading until December at the earliest.

The days when culture secretaries stayed in their jobs for several years, instead of months, are a distant memory. Chris Smith, Tony Blair’s first minister in the department, was there for four years. His successor, the late Tessa Jowell, was in post for six – yes, that’s right, six years – earning respect and widespread affection from stakeholders after a, frankly, shaky start. Both politicians were cheerleaders for the arts.

Since David Cameron’s first election victory, in 2010, only one Conservative culture minister, the first – Jeremy Hunt – could genuinely be said to have got his feet under the table, given the breadth of the brief. The shortest-serving was the last one, Michelle Donelan, who did the job for a mere five months.

“Lucy Frazer is holding one of the top cards in the British economy, which is worth over £117bn,” said McVay. “There’s a big opportunity to grow and create still more jobs. We need some continuity.”

This is especially true since those who have sat down with Frazer in Whitehall are impressed by the new Secretary of State, whose appointment gave her a new “streamlined and refocused” DCMS as the responsibility for technology was moved across in February to the newly minted Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, headed by Donelan.

“This means the DCMS can focus on the culture bit of the brief, which I think is a good thing,” noted McVay, who likes what he’s seen of Frazer. “She is sitting down, listening, engaging, being serious and getting on with the job.”

This view is echoed by a senior broadcaster who is well connected in Whitehall: “Lucy Frazer is very thoughtful and does a lot of listening.

Public domain

She wants to make things happen and bring people together. She likes solutions. She is effective and calm. During the recent BBC Huw Edwards crisis, she was very careful."

The broadcaster added: "In July, she organised a roundtable with Gillian Keegan, the education secretary, to discuss how apprenticeships can be made more effective in the creative industries."

Another high-ranking TV executive who has met Frazer on several occasions said it is evident that the Secretary of State is interested in the opportunities that the creative industries can deliver for young people.

The executive opined: "She is sharp and focused and quite determined in a good way. She pays attention to detail. She's forensic and thinking about what she can do to make a difference. Everything seems to point to her wanting to get things done in the department."

The daughter of Jewish immigrants, she was born in West Yorkshire in 1972 and was educated privately at Gateways School for Girls and Leeds Girls' High School. She attended the all-female Newnham College in Cambridge, where she was elected President of the Cambridge Union during the Michaelmas term. At university, she met her husband, David Leigh, who runs a recruitment company. The couple have two children.

Before becoming an MP, she worked as a barrister in commercial law in London and was appointed a Queen's Counsel a decade ago. She decided to go into politics because she wanted to make a difference, "I am simply someone who has been lucky in her professional career who feels it is important to contribute to society," she once said.

In 2015, she entered parliament after being elected MP for the safe Tory seat of South East Cambridgeshire; she won 48.5% of the vote with a majority of 16,837. The same year she was elected to the Education Select Committee.

Intriguingly, she backed remaining in the EU prior to the 2016 referendum.

Her government roles have included Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice between January 2018 and May 2019 and Solicitor General from May to July 2019 (and reappointed to the post from March to September 2021).

She subsequently worked as a minister in the Ministry of Justice, with a focus on prisons, before joining the Treasury, where she was Financial Secretary to the Treasury. More recently,



Lucy Frazer as a backbencher in 2017

BBC Parliament

she was Minister of State in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and spent seven weeks as the Minister of State at the Department for Transport during the chaos of Liz Truss's brief premiership.

Frazer supported a private members' bill to make so-called "upskirting" (the taking of sexually intrusive photographs) an offence. It failed to pass its second reading but was subsequently championed by the Government and became law in April 2019. At the time, she said: "Upskirting is a humiliating activity, and this law will ensure that the gap in the law which existed will now be filled." Offenders face up to two years in prison.

Frazer backed Rishi Sunak's leadership bid in fulsome terms following the implosion of the Johnson government in July 2022. "I have worked with him as a minister since September, and I have seen first-hand his dedication to the role," she said. "I have seen

his relentless work ethic, his mastery of the detail, complete grasp of his brief and his ability to set strategic direction and see the big picture."

That she can seek the advice of ex-culture secretary John Whittingdale, who is covering as a DCMS minister while Julia Lopez is on maternity leave, should help her work as Secretary of State, not least as the recently announced BBC licence fee review gets down to work. "Not everyone agrees with his views – I know I don't – but John is someone who knows the creative industries inside out," says McVay.

Unlike her predecessor, Michelle Donelan, who had worked as an international marketing communications manager at advertising company WWE, as well as for History channel and for Australian publisher Pacific Magazines, Frazer came to DCMS without any direct experience of being employed in the media.

This lack of media experience is not a disadvantage, according to McVay: "To understand the business, you need an inquiring mind and be able to challenge your officials and the lobbyists. Intellectually, Lucy seems very capable of that.

"From my dealings with her, she is very direct and asks good questions. We need some grown-up politicians, and she is clearly one of them." ■

**'SHE WANTS TO  
MAKE THINGS  
HAPPEN AND  
BRING PEOPLE  
TOGETHER'**

**Pippa Considine** profiles  
**Mike Fries**, CEO of  
Liberty Global, whose  
UK assets include Virgin  
Media and stakes in  
ITV and All3Media

**T**he last time that the CEO of Liberty Global, Mike Fries, spoke at the RTS Cambridge Convention, in 2013, he would have faced the long journey from his home in Denver, Colorado, the HQ of his long-time colleague and Chair of Liberty Global, John Malone.

But, this time, Cambridge is closer to home. After years of flying to Europe two or three times a month, Fries and his wife and daughters are now just down the road from the new Virgin Media O<sub>2</sub> offices in Paddington, living in London's leafy Holland Park.

In 2013, Liberty Global had just bought Virgin Media. In 2023, Fries sits atop a major player in converged broadband, video and mobile communications, with interests in six European countries. In the UK it owns 50% of All3Media, a 9.9% share of ITV and 50% of Virgin Media O<sub>2</sub>, the joint venture with Spain's Telefónica. In February this year, it acquired a 4.9% stake in Vodafone.

According to one senior UK industry executive who has followed his modus operandi closely, Fries is "someone who really understands our country, understands what makes it special". Its shareholdings give it, and Fries, a seat at the UK media industry table and it has, by and large, been a supportive shareholder.

But this CEO is not about to be swayed by his emotions. The Liberty Global business is run on strictly financial-first principles. Fries, who turned 60 earlier this year, is a company man.

He joined UnitedGlobalCom in 1990, which merged with Liberty Media in 2005, becoming Liberty Global. He and Malone, known as the Cable Cowboy after his many telecoms deals, make up the company's two-person Executive Committee.

Malone has a reputation for buying well, running things well and then selling them well. As his right-hand



Liberty Global

# 'Calm, gentle and gracious'

man, Fries packs a lot into a working day, getting up early, especially when he's in the US and his European colleagues have already been up for seven hours. His schedule can take in decision-making across networks, or more strategic work, whether it's focused on M&A or tech or finance ventures.

Then, there's maintaining the Liberty

Global company culture. There are 33,000 employees, whom he describes as "a big family". He has loyal lieutenants working alongside him. "The way we run this company and the way we treat people and reshape as markets change is pretty special," says Fries. "We're not an institution, we're not an empire, we're much more fun."



Fries and 600 or so of his team pedal together on a huge bike ride every summer in the Netherlands. The event raises money for the charity Street Child, which supports children into education in the most marginalised populations across sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Europe.

Maybe some of the spirit of adventure has trickled down to Virgin Media O2's current ad campaign, which features a hang-gliding goat soaring above its rock-bound herd.

Fries, while an expert in all things to do with communications, would definitely leave mad-cap ideas to the

With the bottom line kept firmly in view, the focus of Liberty Global has moved from cable TV to selling connectivity. Over the past seven or eight years, Fries has overseen a shift in the business, from one where video accounted for most of its revenues to one in which the figure is around 15%.

When it comes to content, Virgin Media O2 (VMO2) is strictly an aggregator, giving subscribers a single point to find and organise their viewing, with discounts for bundling within their subscriptions. This positioning is widely seen as wise. Liberty has spent £8.7bn on Virgin Media's network to

but the widely used Openreach (owned by BT but operated at arm's length) has also been upgrading its fibre network, while Sky, using Openreach, pips both its rivals in terms of its TV offer.

One experienced TV alumnus remembers Fries taking the stage at the RTS Cambridge Convention in 2013. Ten years later, with the theme of the convention being "Too much to watch", they suggest a key question for Fries this time around is: "Today's consumer uses subscription services for content – so what should the strategy towards content be for telco platforms? Do you need to own content? Or do you just need to aggregate content services? Or do you simply let TikTok and YouTube go berserk down the wires and your business is just about internet subscription revenues?"

With all the caveats, would VMO2 consider showcasing original content? Fries gives us a thread to develop: "There's so much great content – [including] live, movies, sport. It's very difficult to differentiate ourselves on the basis of some unique content. Difficult, not impossible."

With RTS Cambridge in view, this calm man of business believes "it is critical for the UK television industry to come together now". Collaboration is essential, post-pandemic and facing a struggling economy.

And beyond that? "AI has to be on everyone's mind. When you think about efficiencies, making life simpler for people, that's all going to be great. But when it comes to the creative industry, the jury's out."

Fries grew up in a world of content; his father, Chuck Fries, was a leading American film and TV producer, with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

For his own viewing, apart from sport, Fries is a fan of shows, rather than films. He'll be on the couch with a show from Paramount+, then try another from the same stable. He's been watching *Hijack* on Apple TV+ and he and his family are fans of *Ted Lasso*.

One of the first stops in England this summer for his daughters was the pub in Richmond, south-west London, where the eponymous American football coach has found a home from home. And while it's unlikely that Fries will be buying drinks all round in his local, he now shares Lasso's identity as an American in London, where he is firmly at the heart of the telecoms world. ■



Virgin Media O2's current retail pitch

Virgin Media O2

marketing team. He is described by industry insiders who have met him in a business context as "polite, respectful" and "relatively impenetrable". One says: "He's a slick talker, he can present anything in a positive light." The word "genius" is attached by admirers.

"He's calm, gentle, gracious... he also thanks a lot," says one senior media figure. "I would say he's a gentleman in the old-school way.... His gentlemanly nature has been very helpful to the quality of his relationships."

Fries, who also has a shareholding in Liberty Global, has seen the fruits of his labour. He's been in the spotlight over his sizeable earnings more than once. In 2021, his total compensation was \$62m – though his pay packet was distinctly lower a year later, resonating with the times.

raise coverage to half of the UK and it continues the upgrade with a view to passing 80%. "When you're putting billions into the ground, you don't put billions into content," says an industry analyst.

Does Fries think that we've gone past peak TV? "What I think is over is peak fragmentation," he says. "Viewers will be fed up – if they aren't already – with the multitude of choices. And the goal of companies like ours has always been to make it simple, easy, accessible to watch everything you want on any device."

With a race to lay fibre in the UK and the cost of living crisis encouraging cord-cutting, the challenge for VMO2 is to differentiate from its competitors, chiefly BT and Sky. Its broadband quality is what has made it stand out,



# RTS CRAFT & DESIGN AWARDS 2023

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Each category, where appropriate, will be split into Scripted and Non-Scripted, with the Effects category now split into Special Effects (SFX) and Visual Effects (VFX). For Multicamera Work, sports entries will also now be eligible for this category.

The juries take into careful consideration production differences, budget and time scale involved and, in line with other RTS awards, the RTS stresses that entrants should show awareness of the need to recognise diversity in the industry and the wider community when submitting their content.

All entries should have been first delivered, in the UK, whether by broadcast or online streaming, between 1 September 2022 and 31 August 2023.

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# OUR FRIEND IN SCOTLAND

**S**TV News at Six is Scotland's most watched news programme – something we're very proud of and like to mention rather a lot. But big viewer numbers also bring big responsibilities. We have to ensure that our coverage properly reflects our audience.

Two years ago, we needed to increase the number of people of colour appearing on our programmes. We were also falling short of a 50/50 gender split, and we wanted to make sure more of our stories were inclusive of people with disabilities.

However, changing the face of TV news is no easy task. Daily deadlines mean journalists often rely on known contacts who're readily available. We needed to build a new network of contributors who could bring us ideas and get us into communities we, quite frankly, weren't featuring enough.

But what were the barriers preventing people getting involved in our coverage? We worked alongside Pass the Mic, an organisation set up to improve the representation of women of colour in Scottish news. That input was invaluable.

We found people concerned that journalists might misrepresent them, wouldn't be interested in their views or that they would be "monstered" in a style normally reserved for evasive politicians.

Dispelling myths and letting people see that our journalists were friendly, supportive and sensitive was key. We created the first STV Expert Voices session online with the help of Women in Journalism Scotland. The



## Nichola Kane recounts how an STV News diversity initiative is paying dividends

pandemic was still dominating headlines, so it made sense to find new experts involved in healthcare.

We shared the idea on social media and, within weeks, nearly 200 women had signed up. There were professors and academics but, crucially, also people working on the frontline. Nurses, GPs, reformed drug addicts and unpaid carers were there – a huge range of women keen to have their voices heard.

The sessions came alive thanks to our presenters, reporters, technical staff and producers. They discussed how we plan stories, ran through camera kit, looked at interview techniques and even what to wear. Strobing stripes, noisy jewellery and problematic microphone attachment were all up for discussion, with presenters giving some very honest insight on where they've had to put mic battery packs.

We focus on what reporters want

from an interview and reassure them we're trying to get the best out of our contributors. We highlight that they shouldn't expect the same treatment we might give politicians. We're supportive and discuss the interview before the camera rolls.

Also integral to the sessions are experts who've done numerous media interviews in the past. On that first session, two of the best-known faces of the pandemic, professors Linda Bauld and Devi Sridhar, generously gave us the benefit of their own experience. They talked to the women about how they felt when doing their first interviews, coping with nerves, cutting through jargon and how they dealt with online abuse.

It was fascinating – and bringing them into a session populated by Scottish healthcare professionals was like introducing Beyoncé to a group of music fans. There was a lot of self-declared fangirling!

This summer we celebrated two years of STV Expert Voices with some of the brilliant, talented and smart people we're proud to now have on our database. We've trained nearly 1,000 people, with around 10% appearing on air so far.

Last year, we hit our on-screen diversity targets. Going forward, this remains a focus. And this is only the beginning: we'll keep learning and working with new people as we strive to make STV News as inclusive and representative of our communities as possible. ■

*Nichola Kane is Editor, STV News – Edinburgh/East Scotland, with responsibility for politics and diversity.*

# A life stranger than fiction

Tony Schumacher, creator of acclaimed police series *The Responder*, tells **Matthew Bell** how writing saved him



Tony Schumacher

**T**ony Schumacher is following in the footsteps of fellow Liverpool TV dramatists Alan Bleasdale and Jimmy McGovern – literally so in the case of the *Boys from the Blackstuff* writer.

Schumacher, who enjoyed huge success with BBC One cop series *The Responder* last year, grew up in Huyton on the outskirts of Liverpool.

He recalls running a childhood errand with his father: “Dad pointed across the road and said, ‘That programme we watched last night? The guy who wrote it lived there when he was a kid.’ That was Alan Bleasdale’s house. It wasn’t a great area back then and it was like a physical jolt – someone from round here did that great thing on the telly, and that is why I wrote *The Responder*.”

*The Responder* was a breath of fresh air – a cop show that didn’t feature maverick detectives, serial killers and head-scratching plots. It starred Martin

Freeman as Chris Carson, a lowly response officer working the night shift, dealing with drunks, domestics and drug addicts. “Every night, there’s spit on my face and blood on my boots, and it never stops,” Carson tells his therapist. It’s dark and frequently harrowing, but also funny and profound.

Filming on series 2 of *The Responder* is due to start in Liverpool this month. Is writing a follow-up to a critical and audience hit akin to penning that difficult second album in pop music? “I’m the king of the anecdote – there’s a load of stuff,” says Schumacher, who won a Scriptwriter award from RTS North West for series 1.

Schumacher, who is talking earlier this summer at the North Kensington office of series producers Dancing Ledge, says the writing “is going surprisingly well. Last time, we were pulling our hair out. It was a complete nightmare because of Covid.... This time, it feels like it’s going a bit too

smoothly – when I was a cop, you were always worried when the job was going well.”

Like Carson, Schumacher was a Merseyside response officer. He loved being a copper and it marked a rare period of stability in his life before he left the force, burnt out.

Pre-police, Schumacher had worked on the bins, as a bouncer and even on a cruise ship selling underpants. Life post-police was, if anything, more chaotic. He tried stand-up to replicate the adrenaline rush of the police and even acting, landing small parts in Channel 4 comedy drama *Shameless* and Ken Loach film *Route Irish*.

Schumacher’s life, though, was unravelling. He was diagnosed with PTSD, the result of cumulative incidents during his time on the beat, one of which involved “the death of child, which fucked me up quite a bit”. A breakdown followed, homelessness and even a suicide attempt. “Everything stopped,” he recalls.

Now, in his mid-fifties, Schumacher is comfortable talking about a difficult time in his life. “It’s about being honest – with myself and other people. I don’t feel embarrassed about talking about trying to kill myself,” he says.

It’s a cliché but nonetheless true – writing saved Schumacher. “I got to a point in my life when I thought, ‘I’m never going to write [*The Responder*]’. Then I lost everything and I realised that I could actually do it. I had nothing to lose – I didn’t have to be sensible,” he recalls.

By now working as a taxi driver, he started writing columns for local publication *Liverpool Confidential* after fortuitously picking up its editor in his cab. Three popular thrillers, alternate histories set in a Nazi-occupied London, followed, proving that Schumacher’s life has always been stranger than fiction.

Next came a BBC Radio 4 play, *Fare*, and an episode of Channel 5 prison drama *Clink*, which was made by LA Productions, where Schumacher was mentored by Jimmy McGovern, the creator of *Cracker*, *The Street* and *Time*.

Finally, Schumacher felt ready to write about his time as a copper. “I’d got to a point where I could talk about what went wrong in my head – I was far enough away... to go back and deal with it,” he says.

Schumacher’s reference points were ITV cop series *Liverpool 1*, seminal 1980s US cop show *Hill Street Blues* and Paul Newman movie *Fort Apache, The Bronx*. “It’s not a great film... but the chaos, muckiness and the dirt, and the snow piled up at the side of the street captured the kind of New York beat thing,” he says.

Realism is important to Schumacher, who recalls the derision real-life cops reserved for telly police dramas. “The lads used to watch stuff only to moan about it – we’d sit in the canteen and think, ‘That doesn’t happen.’”

*The Responder* imposes a ban on TV cop clichés: “No whiteboards and no pictures on the wall – every noticeboard I knew in the police was ripped. It was only in the major incident room that there’d be a whiteboard. In the police, the place was a fucking shambles – you were lucky if you found a kettle that worked.”

Though important, realism takes second place to his characters’ internal struggles. “I’m more interested in what’s happening in people’s heads than in the police station,” says Schumacher.



Nevertheless, he adds, “I wouldn’t want to read about what’s going on in my head all the time; you’d have to be a complete narcissist if that’s all you were interested in. I want to know what happens next.

“When the show came out, Jimmy McGovern said to me: ‘Why did you let them put all that plot in?’ But I like the plot – that’s why I wrote thrillers. And, it’s got to be funny – it can’t be just misery.”

Publicising *The Responder*, though, left him “exposed in a way I’ve never felt before. Interview after interview after interview, talking about stuff, and I

thought, ‘Fuck, have I given too much of myself away? But now I’m reconciled with that – it’s all right.’”

For Schumacher, writing is therapeutic: “It is good for the soul. And even if nobody sees it, even if it’s terrible, you will feel better for having written.

“[Writing] has been harder than I thought it would be, but... emotionally, for me, it’s been the most rewarding job I’ve ever done in my life.

“If you’d said to me 20 years ago, did I think I was going to be here? No. I thought I’d be limping to the end of a police career, looking for a knee replacement.” ■

## Constrained by a class corset

‘I stumbled across the story of the first football club who were not posh – it was a public school game then. They were called Blackburn Olympic... and they won the FA Cup... I thought, “That’s a brilliant story, there’s got to be a show in it.”... and then I found out that Julian Fellowes had a written a show [*The English Game*] about it.

‘I’m sure it’s amazing, and this is not in any way, shape or form a dig at Lord Fellowes, but I thought, if I went into a television office and said I want to write *Downton Abbey*, they would literally throw me out the fucking window... They’d say, “Tony, go away and write

something gritty and northern.”

‘And I’d go away and write it because I’ve got to pay my bills and for a two-year-old. I’d love to get to a point where working-class writers don’t just have to write stuff that’s working class and can say, ‘I’ve got this idea about Lord Fauntleroy who wants to go and, say, vanquish the hunt.’

‘I didn’t set out to write about what I know but I ended up writing about what I know and... it has given me a platform. But... when a working-class person goes into a room they are definitely treated differently to someone who doesn’t sound like me.’

Thanks to shows such as *Slow Horses* and *Hijack*, the tech giant's streaming service is gaining traction in a crowded market. **Tara Conlan** reports



Idris Elba in *Hijack*

Apple TV+

# Apple to its core

Two statistics released in recent months have made people sit up and pay attention to the burgeoning progress made by the streaming service Apple TV+. In May, the Jason Sudeikis-fronted football comedy drama, *Ted Lasso*, became the first Apple show to feature in Barb's SVoD average UK monthly audience top 20.

It came in at number 18, with around 963,000 viewers – well below the most-watched (Netflix's *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story*, seen by around 3 million) but a milestone nonetheless.

Then, in June, Barb released figures revealing that, although the number of British households with access to streaming services declined in the first quarter of this year – from 19.6 million to 19.1 million – two streaming services actually grew: Now TV (up 8% to 2.0 million) and Apple TV+ (up 13% to 1.9 million).

Of course, it is important to note that Apple TV+ is well behind Netflix (which has almost 17 million UK subscribers), Amazon Prime Video (12.9 million) and Disney+ (7.1 million). As Barb Chief Executive Justin Sampson said: "Apple is coming from a much lower base", but the service only launched in November 2019 and "it is clear that it is becoming more successful".

The platform's trajectory – despite the decline in streaming subs due to the cost-of-living crisis – has left many asking: what is the secret of its success and what is it planning next?

A key objective of Apple TV+ appears to be quality rather than quantity. Since launching, Apple's heads of worldwide video, Zack Van Amburg and Jamie Erlicht, have been selective about whom they hire and what they commission.

With its focus on originals and financed by Apple's deep pockets – in June the tech behemoth became the world's first company to achieve a

market value of \$3tr – the streaming service has inevitably attracted high-profile talent and content. One of its first shows was Reese Witherspoon and Jennifer Aniston's *The Morning Show*, which captured the #MeToo zeitgeist and helped get the service off to a strong start.

Word of mouth and critical acclaim helped spread the word, along with trial subscriptions given away with Apple products.

Hits grew UK subs, particularly the stylish spy drama *Slow Horses*, starring Gary Oldman, and the previously mentioned *Ted Lasso*, which resonated with UK audiences due to its Premier League setting and mostly British cast.

Many awards followed, including Oscars for *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse* (a BBC co-production) and the feature film *CODA*, and a Bafta for the Sharon Horgan-fronted comedy series *Bad Sisters*.

As one producer put it, what Apple

TV+ has done with its commissioning policy is to “set the bar phenomenally high. It is not commissioning very much. But what it commissions does well.”

This approach is timely: viewers are overwhelmed with the avalanche of content available since the streaming boom. Rather than scrolling through reams of “maybes”, Apple TV+ viewers know they’ll get something more “selective” – perfect for the time-poor viewer.

Enders Analysis Head of Television Tom Harrington says it is important to “look at why” Apple TV+ exists. He explains that, for years, Apple was

it is looking to continue to expand. It recently added to its European team – there are offices in Paris, Munich and London – by announcing the hire of BBC documentaries and popular factual commissioner Max Gogarty.

He is expected to report to his ex-BBC colleague Alison Kirkham, whose team has been responsible for hits like Two-four’s Eugene Levy-fronted *The Reluctant Traveller*, who in turn reports to Europe creative director Jay Hunt.

Kirkham joined as commissioner for unscripted in 2020 – the same year Kim Varvell came on board as a drama

made them ideal hires for Apple TV+: “Alison and Jay are whip-smart and have a huge breadth of knowledge.”

“People remember Jay oversaw the move of the Paralympics and *Great British Bake Off* to Channel 4, but don’t forget she was also editor of the 1:00pm and 6:00pm BBC News bulletins and ran BBC One and Channel 5. Alison has done everything from securing Prince Harry and Meghan Markle’s engagement interview, big shows such as *Blue Planet II* and worked on the *Today* programme.”

Hunt works within Van Amburg and Erlich’s main Apple leadership team, which includes head of programming Matt Cherniss, head of features Matt Dentler, head of production Bruce Richmond, head of children’s programming Tara Sorensen and casting supremo Tamara Hunter.

The luxury of making fewer shows means commissioners can be more focused on what makes them distinctive and hopefully world class.

A producer who has worked with Apple TV+ said: “One of the secrets of its success is close collaboration [with indies] and being hand-in-hand during development, so we are aligned to deliver its brief.”

Apple Studios – the production arm – has some big talent coming up to win viewers, including the Martin Scorsese, Leonardo DiCaprio and Robert De Niro film *Killers of the Flower Moon*, and a highly anticipated and as-yet untitled Formula One feature starring Brad Pitt.

New TV shows include series 3 of *The Morning Show*, the John le Carré documentary *The Pigeon Tunnel*, and nature shows *Born to Be Wild* and *Endangered Planet*.

Some UK producers are concerned that, with the bar for Apple commissions set so high, they can spend too much time developing the right show and get disheartened because not that much is greenlit.

Despite the steady increase in the amount Apple TV+ is commissioning, it is unlikely there will be a sudden step change in the volume: those who have worked with the platform stress that quality is the overwhelming priority.

Apple TV+ does not talk publicly about its strategy but it very much resembles Aesop’s fable of the tortoise and the hare: slow and steady wins the race – and, through its carefully thought-out expansion, the service looks set to take an even bigger bite of the streaming subscriptions market. ■



Kristin Scott Thomas and Gary Oldman in *Slow Horses*

Apple TV+

hugely successful selling phones and laptops, but with the market saturated growth had slowed.

That user base has given Apple access to some of the richest people in the world, says Harrington, so “what it has done is sort of pivoted. It is still mainly a hardware business but that’s been skewed... a bit more towards services, accessories and up-selling.”

“It becomes part of this mega subscription with a cloud sub, music, games, things like that. [Plus] it’s creating a trading platform. Apple TV+ is a valuable part of that ecosystem to bring people in.”

Estimates put Apple TV+’s content budget at around \$8bn, just under half that of Amazon and Netflix. So with subscriptions increasing will it commission more shows? Producers say Apple wants high-quality shows that do not adversely affect the brand: smart TV for people with smart TVs.

Apple is not rash with its cash, but

commissioner working on shows that have included the Uma Thurman-led *Suspicion* and the highly praised Idris Elba vehicle *Hijack*.

Varvell announced in April that she was leaving to co-found indie Conker Pictures. The appointment of a new scripted commissioner will be announced soon.

Many in British TV are intrigued by Apple TV+, especially as it stays so quiet. Corporately, Apple executives tend not to shout much and Apple TV+ – unlike some in the entertainment industry – prefers to let the content do the talking.

So much so that there was surprise when Hunt made a rare appearance last year to interview Paramount UK Chief Content Officer Ben Frow for the RTS. Apple declined interviews for this piece and Hunt has not given an interview since joining Apple.

One producer said Hunt and Kirkham’s public service background



Striking actors in Los Angeles

SAG-AFTRA

# Why tensions are running high

**U**S screenwriters went on strike in early May when the Writers Guild of America (WGA) was unable to reach agreement with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), which represents studios and streamers such as NBCUniversal, Warner Bros. Discovery, Disney, Amazon/MGM and Netflix.

They were joined on 14 July by the Screen Actors Guild and American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), whose 160,000 members include, among others, actors, dancers, singers and recording artists. The last time both the SAG and WGA were simultaneously on strike was in 1960.

The demands put to the AMPTP by the WGA and SAG centre on better pay, streaming residuals, the preservation

**Claire Enders** looks at the economics behind the US writers and actors strikes and their impact in the UK

of traditional writers rooms and future-proofing creatives against the potential impacts of artificial intelligence – which could see software generating replacements for writers' words and actors' likenesses.

Viewing behaviours have shifted alongside the business models of AMPTP's members. Library-based services have accelerated the trend towards shorter TV seasons, with fewer episodes than the 22 to 24 per season that were generally ordered for network

sitcoms or procedural dramas; prestige TV series from the likes of HBO have always been at lower volumes.

One consequence of this change is that fewer writers are needed and for shorter periods, and those who are hired consequently find themselves becoming disconnected from the rest of production.

There have been allegations of sharp practice, with the writing process increasingly compartmentalised through breaking up the story and by drafts and rewrites being farmed out to different casuals on day rates. This means that ownership and attribution – and therefore bargaining power – over the finished script has been eroded.

The streaming model of paying a lump sum to acquire rights in perpetuity is a prohibition on residual payments – not that there is much viewing data



to establish whether anything is a hit, anyway.

And when we look at things from the point of view of the studios, they have invested more than \$200bn in content for their streaming services since 2017 and are experiencing sharp declines in their linear businesses. They are slashing costs while their share prices are also under pressure. Netflix and Amazon have both had stockmarket corrections in the past couple of years. The studios are exploring and pursuing ways to minimise their cost bases.

All of this has been happening for some time. The major streamers, the source of a decade of US production growth, began to stop expanding the amount they spent on their original domestic content pre-pandemic.

Over the past two years, across the sector, there have been attempts to dilute the impact of cost inflation by making cuts within productions – utilising fewer location shots, fewer narrative arcs and fewer supporting actors. Content spend was still required in territories that weren't earmarked for growth.

There are pressures to reach a resolution to the strikes. The pandemic accelerated the perception that broadcast TV was old and stale as the schedules contained many repeats. The film industry desperately needs a renaissance following Covid. Clearly, the vast majority of members of both the WGA and SAG cannot survive on no income.

But for library-based video services, which are less reliant on new releases for subscriber retention, the strikes mean lower outgoings without much additional churn – and therefore there is less of a hurry to settle. With no content for sale, Netflix recently upgraded its free cash flow for 2023 by \$1.5bn.

UK Equity members are prohibited from joining the strike, but there has been some impact here. Locally shot films featuring American actors, such as the live action *How to Train Your Dragon*, *Deadpool 3* and *Wicked*, have all been paused. This potentially affects thousands of British workers. The strikes could also influence the timing of new Hollywood film productions in the UK.

But are there any positives for the UK content sector? The chance to license more library catalogue to the US is probably overplayed. During the pandemic there was a nice uptick but it was hardly transformational. There is such a surfeit of US scripted content

floating around after years of escalating production that there must be hundreds of unwatched shows that are a better fit for US audiences than old episodes of ITV's *Vera*.

The internationals will surely consider diverting commissioning budget to the UK. But the days of Netflix being able to greenlight new projects and produce them at breakneck speed (compared with the slow-moving commissioning processes in the UK and the US studios) has been over for a while.

It is unlikely that there will be a material shift before there is a resolution. For all the rhetoric around the

well. Even the challenging advertising market is seemingly on the up.

Enders predicted a few years ago that growth in European content supply would soon reach a tipping point as streamers shifted from market grabs to profitability and the resources poured into production federally, while those from consumers and advertisers declined. This is now coming to life.

However, other factors converge to act as ballast for consistent European content investment. Whatever happens to the appetite of the international SVoDs, the situation in Europe is that broadcasters' financing remains



Click News and Media

internationalisation of tastes, TV content still travels relatively poorly. *Squid Game* is the exception that proves the rule; name me another Korean drama that has broken through globally.

Rather, this appears to be a moment for the overheated US content production pipeline to contract and allow volumes to return to a sustainable level. Netflix has already reached a ceiling in US original content volume, hitting that mark before the hyper-competitive land-grab phase of streaming had even concluded. Its US output in 2022 was on a par with 2018.

So, maybe there is no great upside for the UK from these strikes, but it does highlight another possibility on our doorstep: exploring deeper working relationships with European free-to-air broadcasters, which have seen their businesses hold up relatively

resilient and often guaranteed, though it is under stress. Moreover, the public continues to favour local fare, while talent likes the incentivised deals of European independent producers and EU regulation maintains certain volume levels.

These shape a sector that remains well-resourced but under enough pressure to have to be pragmatic. This pragmatism means easier access to quality content and the opportunity for the UK to have greater creative influence over it. The days of "peak TV", driven by the US streamers, appear to be well and truly over, which leave European co-productions as opportunities to be maximised. ■

**Claire Enders is the founder of Enders Analysis and is a speaker at the RTS Cambridge Convention.**

# How the RTS is changing lives



RTS scholars taking part in the Society's summer tour

Paul Hampartsourmian

**D**uring her early years at school, Catriona Walsh didn't speak. It might be a surprise, then, for her teachers to discover that she wants to be a TV presenter. This summer, she's spending her university holiday working as a studio runner and researcher on *Blue Peter*, upping sticks from her hometown of Derry, Northern Ireland, for Salford's MediaCity in pursuit of her dream job.

"It's just been phenomenal. It has been a life-changing experience. Being from across the water and coming from a working-class background, you never really feel like these opportunities are accessible, and I think the RTS really made them a reality," says Catriona.

As a member of the 2022 cohort of RTS Bursary scholars, which saw a record-breaking 45 students awarded a bursary, Catriona landed her work experience through her industry

Since 2014, RTS bursaries have helped hundreds of disadvantaged students pursue a career in TV and film. **Caitlin Danaher** spoke to recent scholars

mentor, Nicola Benham, who is the series producer of *Blue Peter*.

It's a full-circle moment for Catriona, who speaks of the huge impact that children's TV had on her life growing up. "When I was younger, I didn't have the best relationship with school and I wasn't always encouraged to go into school, just because of things that were going on at home. It was watching TV as a child that really taught me a lot of things and encouraged my development," she says. "So now, I want to keep making programmes

that really have an impact on kids."

Since its inception in 2014, the RTS has helped 288 students from low-income backgrounds pursue a career in the screen industries, by providing them with an industry mentor, financial support and a host of learning, development and networking opportunities.

Bursaries are offered to talented students who show a real passion for the TV and film industries. One such scholar is Joseph McCawley, who impressed with his short film created at the age of 17 and starring professional actor Jim Sweeney.

When the actor discovered that, far from being a professional production, the shoot would involve a one-person crew based in the teenager's family flat in East Kilbride, he was ready to back out. A persuasive chat with the aspiring film-maker resulted in Sweeney not only appearing in the film but giving his time for free.

Recognising Joseph's passion for

screenwriting, the RTS paired him up with mentors Sam Vincent and Jonathan Brackley, two of the writers behind *Spooks* and the BBC's recent detective drama *Better*.

"I honestly couldn't have asked for better mentors. They have continued to give me so much detailed guidance and advice. They've been a continual sounding board for me in terms of career steps and how I move forward within the industry," says Joseph.

Former scholars have gone on to forge burgeoning careers in the TV industry. One is Lee Hodgetts, who landed a role at Sam Mendes's company, Neal Street Productions, where he is currently assisting on Armando Iannucci's upcoming comedy series *The Franchise*.

Lee reveals that he landed the job at Neal Street due, in part, to the connections he made during his time as an RTS scholar: "During the pandemic, I was working in a care home. Because nothing was really happening in the industry, [former RTS Bursary Co-ordinator] Anne Dawson organised a Zoom with the All3Media talent managers. I attended a couple of those Zooms and stayed in touch.

"When I moved to London in 2021, a few opportunities started to come up and one of the talent managers kept putting me forward for them," he says.

Of course, Lee ultimately got offered the job through his own outstanding merits, which include his first-ever play winning a BBC Writersroom competition, and another of his works being shortlisted for a Sky Studios comedy writing contest.

Reflecting on his time on the bursary scheme, Lee reveals that a personal highlight was the RTS Patrons Dinner, where scholars enjoy a meal with TV's top executives. "I think when you come from somewhere like St Helens, a very working-class town, and then you're suddenly thrown into this almost upper-class dining experience with the crème de la crème of the industry, it's an interesting contrast.

"It was definitely a movie moment for me because I was dressed in a suit, having this amazing four-course dinner," he says. "I had the whole 'which cutlery do I use?' experience. I think I just looked around and started to realise who was in the room and I was like, whoa, something's happening here. It was like winning a little lottery."

At last year's Patrons Dinner, bursary alumnus Liam Warden was handed the

nerve-racking task of giving a speech to a room packed full of some of the most influential figures in British TV.

"It was a bit of an out-of-body experience when I was actually speaking... I think public speaking is probably one of the most daunting things anyone can do. It's like doing an extreme sport," Liam laughs. Despite the pressure, Liam delivered a superb, seamless speech on the life-changing impact of the bursary scheme.

Raised in a single-parent household in Peterborough, Liam and his brother were the first generation of his family

This summer, the RTS's digital innovation scholars took part in the RTS summer tour, a 10-day trip across London and Scotland, where they visited a different production company each day. One such scholar is Haseena Iqbal who is undertaking a degree in cyber security at Aston University.

"My experience so far has been amazing! The summer tour of TV studios was definitely an unmatched experience. Every company was buzzing and had such an exciting energy. I could feel the passion in seeing how ideas were brought to life," she says.



Catriona Walsh did work experience on *Blue Peter*

Catriona Walsh

to attend university. Liam was enjoying his journalism course at the University of Sheffield when the pandemic struck, wiping out the practical components of his course.

Using his bursary money, the budding journalist purchased a DSLR camera and a professional microphone and set to make his own high-quality videos from his bedroom. Graduating during Covid, Liam believes his work experience at Sky News, covering the 2019 general election, "was the single most important thing" he received from the RTS bursary scheme. "In our unique circumstances with Covid, if anything was going to give you an edge when it came to getting a job it was work experience – because people had so little," he says.

After he graduated, Liam landed a coveted spot in Sky's Content Academy and has since been promoted to junior assistant producer in football at Sky Sports.

In September, she'll be joining a group of scholars heading to the RTS Cambridge Convention to hear some of TV's top executives and thought leaders set out their agenda for the future of the television sector. Haseena is particularly excited to hear from Channel 4 CEO Alex Mahon. "[Channel 4] is known for instigating controversial discussions and providing a platform for alternative voices," she says.

Her fellow scholar, Mendii Bala, a film and TV production student at the University of Edinburgh, is looking forward to delving into the hot-button topic of AI. "With AI threatening to revolutionise various industries, I am certain it will also have a profound impact on the film and TV industry," says Mendii.

How profound none of us yet know. But one thing is clear: the unbridled enthusiasm and extraordinary talent of the RTS scholars prove that, when it comes to TV's next generation, the kids are all right. ■

From left: Cecilie Fjellhøy, Ayleen Charlotte and Pernilla Sjöholm



Joshua Wilks/Netflix

# A true crime classic

**F**ew documentaries have made as big a splash as *The Tinder Swindler*, the story of an online dating scammer, Simon, and three of the many women he conned out of huge amounts of money.

When the true crime feature came out last year, it was the most-watched feature documentary in Netflix's history, notching up 166 million views in its first month.

*The Tinder Swindler* deservedly won its director and writer, Felicity Morris, a Bafta but no one, including Morris, would deny that the real stars of the show are Cecilie, Pernilla and Ayleen.

The three women who, between them, lost hundreds of thousands of pounds and braved public humiliation by revealing how Simon, posing as an Israeli diamond dealer and international playboy, won their affection and then rinsed them for every penny they owned or could borrow.

It is a riveting film, which revolves around three lengthy interviews with the women and is peppered with the WhatsApp messages they sent to and received from Simon, a man so reptilian that even his mum disowned him.

## The RTS hears the inside story of how Netflix breakout hit *The Tinder Swindler* made it to the screen

At an RTS Futures event in July, Morris, Cecilie Fjellhøy – a Norwegian serial Tinder dater based in London – the film's producer, Bernadette Higgins and editor Julian Hart revealed how they made *The Tinder Swindler*.

"None of us would have known about the story had it not been for Cecilie," said Morris.

When the penny finally dropped that Simon was a scammer, Fjellhøy took her story to VG, a Norwegian newspaper based in Oslo, determined that no more women would be taken in.

VG spent months researching the story and published an in-depth investigation. It came to the attention of London production company Raw, which began developing a documentary feature; Fjellhøy and Pernilla Sjöholm were the key contributors. The latter was a friend rather than girlfriend,

yet still fell under Simon's spell.

Usually, documentaries are made after the events they're portraying have played out, but Simon, having been identified as a conman and off Tinder, was still on the run. "When we started, we had no idea where the story would end," said Morris.

In fact, the film was being edited when the programme-makers found their ending by persuading one of Simon's victims, who had taken satisfying revenge on him, to participate. "We were in the edit when Bernie [Higgins] finally managed to convince Ayleen to be in the film... that gave us an ending that, if you'd been in a writers room, you couldn't have come up with anything as good," revealed Morris.

The story "reads like a Hollywood script", said Higgins. "Cecilie and Pernilla were such brilliant storytellers and so engaging – [we knew] we had to tell this story to understand how something like this unfolds and make people understand that it really can happen to anyone

"We've all heard about elderly people being defrauded at home or of desperate people... but, before the *Tinder Swindler*, we hadn't really heard



From left: Julian Hart, Cecilie Fjellhøy, Yinka Bokinni, Felicity Morris and Bernadette Higgins

Paul Hampartsoumian

stories about young, professional, educated, cosmopolitan women who had had the wool pulled over their eyes.

“There is a scam for everyone and these guys know how to spot people’s vulnerabilities... everyone is vulnerable in some way.”

Fjellhøy’s motivation for appearing in the programme was twofold: “Simon was still out there – he hadn’t received the kind of justice that I felt that he deserved [and] I didn’t want anyone else to go through what I had been through.”

It was a brave and selfless decision – after VG published its investigation, Fjellhøy was subjected to vicious social media trolling and ridiculed for her supposed naivety.

For the film, Fjellhøy was interviewed by Morris over two long days, which she freely admits was hugely upsetting. “What was most difficult for me was that I had to go through very loving feelings; the worst was having to revisit the kiss.... It was so disgusting having to talk about the first kiss with a person that you absolutely hate right now.

“It was a roller coaster of emotions, but I knew it was important and I needed to get through it.... It was painful to see myself cry [on screen].”

Editing the film was a complex and lengthy process; Fjellhøy’s interview alone ran to nine hours. “That is actually a good sign because it means there’s lots of good stuff – the interview with Cecilie was really strong, as they all were,” recalled Hart.

“You cut it down,” he explained, while keeping the key “information and emotion”. Hart added the WhatsApp messages between Simon and his victims to enrich the story. To provide atmosphere, archive film was added from movies such as Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* and *Charade*, starring Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn. The latter, explained Hart, was free to use “because someone fucked up” with the rights in 1963, when it was released.

Thanks to the efforts of another of the swindler’s victims, Dutch woman Ayleen Charlotte, Simon is punished, to a degree, for his crimes. To enjoy his comeuppance – and they will – viewers will have to watch *The Tinder Swindler*.

Does Fjellhøy feel justice was done? “In the sense that everyone knows him for what he is – and he’s very angry at us – which I’m very happy about. But it has been disappointing [to see] the lack of action by the European

police... they should be ashamed.”

But Fjellhøy had nothing but praise for another oft-criticised profession. “Thank God for journalism – no one took us seriously until I contacted journalists... then someone truly listened to me and my story.”

Working with the Norwegian newspaper and the film-makers at Raw, she said, had “been healing... I had to think about what I did and what he did to me”.

Since the film’s release, Fjellhøy says her life has become “very weird”. She has told her story widely and is launching a charity to support the victims of fraud and help build their resilience.

Fjellhøy has received many messages of support and gratitude, which has been hugely beneficial, but emphasised the “emotional pain [Simon] put on his victims, the emotional abuse and the horrible, horrible treatment of us”. He remains at liberty in his native Israel and is still active on social media. ■

**Report by Matthew Bell. The RTS Futures event ‘Anatomy of a hit: The Tinder Swindler’ was held at the London Transport Museum on 13 July. It was hosted by the broadcaster Yinka Bokinni and produced by Michael Fraser and Rajveer Sihota.**

**T**he *Effects of Lying* is a remarkable film, not least because it was made on a micro-budget in only 12 days. And despite a cast of high-profile, mostly British Asian, actors, there's not a curry in sight.

Its writer, director and actors were keen to point out, following a screening at Birmingham Indian Film Festival – an event held in partnership with RTS Midlands – that the script transcends ethnicity.

*The Effects of Lying*, currently streaming on ITVX, is a comedy about a dysfunctional family who could be from anywhere.

Naveen (Ace Bhatti) is trying to cope with a teenage daughter with an eating disorder and a father with dementia when he discovers his wife, Sangeeta (Laila Rouass), is having an affair. His life begins to fall apart as he finds out more about his past and long-held secrets are revealed.

The cast also includes *EastEnders* star Navin Chowdhry, Bhasker Patel from *Emmerdale* and Mark Williams of *Father Brown* and *Harry Potter* fame.

Director Isher Sahota met writer James Hey when they were both working on *Doctors* at BBC Birmingham. Sahota was impressed by Hey's script for *The Effects of Lying* when he read it more than three years ago. He said: "It was so refreshing to read a script about a British South-East Asian family that had nothing to do with their ethnicity. It's not about what it's like to be British Asian, it's about love, loss and secrets."

Bhatti confessed: "I took the role partly out of vanity, as I wanted to play a lead – I usually have smaller parts. There aren't that many parts out there now. That's not a complaint: that's a challenge."



*The Effects of Lying*: Ace Bhatti and Laila Rouass

## A tale of love and loss

**RTS Midlands** A new comedy with a high-profile cast of British Asian actors transcends ethnicity, says **Roz Laws**

He brought Rouass on board, who said, "To work with Ace is a joy, so I knew it wasn't going to be shit! I've worked with him many times since the 2005 drama *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee*.

"I loved the script and that there was really no reference to where these people were from. The characters were full of volume and body."

Rouass's character has a strong sex drive that overtakes any sense of morality. This might be challenging for some actors, but Rouass

points out that she gained plenty of experience as the voracious Amber in the racy early-2000s ITV drama *Footballers' Wives*. "For me, it's not such a big deal to play Sangeeta," she mused. "After *Footballers' Wives*, it wasn't that alien to me and she's a couple of notches down

from Amber! We had time to rehearse and get to know each other. And they brought in an intimacy co-ordinator for some of the scenes where I felt a little uncomfortable, so it was a safe space."

**'THERE IS NOT A CURRY IN SIGHT'**

The film was independently funded by four businessmen from Leicester. Producer Jon Tarcy told the audience: "We realised we had to get out there and do it without waiting for the cavalry to come.

"We were very worried that if we went to institutions to get funding, we might be waiting up to seven years to get started, and we wanted to do it now.

"We're delighted it is reaching a mainstream audience on ITVX. We're also hoping for international sales after its North American premiere at the New York Asian Film Festival." ■

**B**BC One's hit war-time drama *World on Fire* returned over the summer – but only after a frustrating series of delays, largely caused by Covid, which led creator Peter Bowker to joke that the series “took longer to film than the war itself”.

Bowker was speaking at an online RTS National Event in July ahead of the transmission of the second series, almost four years after the first aired.

Series 2 sees the battle against fascism shift from Europe to North Africa. “I wanted to write a series that was a genuinely global look at the war,” explained Bowker, who penned the drama with Rachel Bennette and Matt Jones.

“The DNA of the series is to present it as a truly global conflict and, in particular, to introduce the armed forces from what was the Empire and became the Commonwealth, and [address] the whole convoluted, sometimes toxic, sometimes mutually supportive, relationship between the colonised and the colonisers.”

The war overseas and in the air is interspersed with scenes of domestic life on the home front in Manchester and in Berlin. “As always,” added Bowker, “it’s [about] finding the small human moments in what might be called bigger history.”

One horrifying story is that of 16-year-old Marga (Miriam Schiweck) who is part of the Nazi Lebensborn (Fount of Life) programme, whose goal was to increase the number of “racially pure” Aryan people by forcing girls to have sex with army officers.

Pakistani-Canadian actor Ahad Raza Mir joins the cast as Rajib, a captain in the Indian Army. “He’s an army



*World on Fire:*  
Ahad Raza Mir in  
the foreground

BBC

## ‘A truly global conflict’

**National Event** Peter Bowker’s Second World War drama makes a belated but welcome return to BBC One. **Matthew Bell** reports

man... he has strong beliefs... but he has an identity crisis. He doesn’t know what to believe by the end of the series. Everything he believes in falls apart,” explained the actor.

Rajib is fighting in the North African desert but, thanks to modern set design and special effects, the scenes were shot on in Belfast. “I flew over and walked into this studio... and it was genuinely the desert – it had sand everywhere... it smelt of sand,” said the actor.

The explosions, though, were real. Mir recalled: “You don’t have to act very much... I don’t know about the rest of the boys but I was terrified every time they rigged up the explosions. I hated it, but it really helped the performance and drove that factor of fear and panic.”

In contrast, Blake Harrison, who returns as Sergeant Stan Raddings, loved the battle scenes. He joked: “Physicality is my middle name – I took to that like a duck to water.... I really understand why some of these incredible actors just decide to do action movies all the time, because it’s so much fun.

“What are we doing today? ‘Well, this guy has set up a bunch of explosions and you’re going to run away from it.’ And you’re going to pay me for that? Fantastic.”

The scripts are peppered with what Bowker calls “flash, bang, wallop moments”, but the scenes he really liked writing are “two men trapped in a ditch overnight talking – that’s where you find the humanity”.

Jonah Hauer-King, who plays Harry, an officer

reckless both in war and in his personal life, described the shoot as “frenetic but amazing fun as well”.

Julia Brown, who plays Lois, the mother of Harry’s baby, added: “The whole thing was shot out of sequence, slightly chaotic at times and you had to keep up with the adrenaline of it all and not let the emotion affect you – but that’s our job as an actor, isn’t it? You’ve got to perform on the day and not take it home with you.”

*World on Fire* is made by Mammoth Screen and its co-production partner, Masterpiece, with support from Northern Ireland Screen. It is available on BBC iPlayer. ■

**The RTS National Event ‘World on Fire: series 2 Q&A’ hosted by the broadcaster Charlie Girling on 6 July.**

**RTS London** Thirty-eight years ago, BBC music broadcaster Richard Skinner introduced one of TV's biggest-ever live events: "It's 12:00 noon in London, 7:00am in Philadelphia... and around the world, it's time for *Live Aid*!"

The benefit concert to raise money for the victims of famine in Ethiopia drew an estimated 1.5 billion television viewers worldwide.

Music promoter Harvey Goldsmith – who orchestrated *Live Aid*'s Wembley concert and, two decades later, the *Live 8* benefit concerts – talked about his career with lawyer and broadcaster Andrew Eborn for an RTS London online event in July.

In the wake of Michael Buerk's harrowing reports for the BBC from Ethiopia and the consequent Band Aid record, *Do They Know It's Christmas?*, Bob Geldof asked Goldsmith to stage a charity concert at Wembley Stadium. The promoter had just 10 and a half weeks to organise it.

Channel 4 offered two hours of coverage, recalled Goldsmith, which neither he nor Geldof felt was sufficient. They wanted to televise the



## Live Aid: four decades on

whole concert, plus the US version in Philadelphia, a total of 16 hours of television.

Goldsmith approached Mike Appleton, producer of BBC Two music show *The Old Grey Whistle Test*. A few meetings later and BBC One Controller Michael Grade

decided to "clear the schedule – and from that point onwards we had a show".

*Live Aid* was announced with only Geldof's band, The Boomtown Rats, and Ultravox signed up. At a press conference, recalled Goldsmith, "Bob got up... and rattled off

a list of names – I was kicking his shins and saying, 'Shut up, [but] one by one, most of them fell into place.'"

Looking back, Goldsmith said: "Showbiz changed as a result of [*Live Aid*] because the media figured out that music sold newspapers... the cult of celebrity came out of that. TV was quite proud of itself because it realised it could raise a lot of money, so out of that came *Children in Need* and [other telethons]."

*Live 8* in 2005 was "completely different", said Goldsmith. "People were determined to put Africa on the agenda of the G8 [world leaders] conference [in Scotland]. The pressure came from Bono, Madonna and Elton.... We put enough pressure on and they did it with Gordon Brown and Tony Blair [to the fore]."

*Live 8* was easier to organise, he said. Ten concerts were held, largely simultaneously, worldwide. "All the countries were great, the governments got it, everybody got it, except the parks and the police – they tried to shut us down."

**Matthew Bell**

## The silver screen is alive and kicking

**RTS Technology** RTS Technology Centre members visited the Cinelab centre in Slough in July and discovered that film is alive and well in the digital age.

Cinelab focuses on film processing, scanning, restoration and post-production and, despite the prophecies of some, film clearly still has a key role in the presentation of the moving image.

Host for the evening was Adrian Bull, Cinelab's MD,



whose persuasive case for film challenged the attitude of those who think "film is dead". That is not to say that digital does not have a complementary role, particularly in distribution media.

There are also hybrid methodologies where a story is shot digitally and then transferred to film to give it a filmic look and feel. Those present saw an impressive visual comparison between the various formats, from super 8mm to 65mm Imax, which clearly showed the nuanced difference in look.

Recently, Bull explained, there has been a resurgence in shooting on film, particularly for big-budget movies and high-end TV. At the

Oscars this year, a disproportionate number of winners were shot on film, and many top directors and DoPs prefer to shoot it this way.

It is also an efficient way to store data, in terms of capacity and longevity in the archive.

After the presentation, a tour of the facility showed how Cinelab combines state-of-the-art technology in film processing with the high-end craft skills of its employees.

Bull reminded the RTS visitors that, despite any benefits that artificial intelligence may bring, the look and feel of film is something that will continue to be very much in demand for the foreseeable future.

**Tim Marshall**



An enthusiastic audience of 250 at Bournemouth University enjoyed an evening with double Palme d'Or winner Ken Loach in July.

Now 87, the director said he had completed his last feature, *The Old Oak* – the final film in a trilogy exploring themes of social justice and inequality, with *I, Daniel Blake* and *Sorry We Missed You*.

RTS Southern Chair Steph Farmer talked to Loach about his early career, why he developed a passion for working with untrained actors and his relationship with writer Paul Laverty, which began on his 1996 film *Carla's Song*.

Loach entertained the audience with anecdotes about his early career at the BBC, learning how to work with cameras in close-up with actors on *The Wednesday Play*. Most famously, he directed 1966's *Cathy Come Home*, voted number 2 by the BFI in its top 100 TV shows of the 20th century.

Loach said that working on TV cop series *Z Cars* and the



From left: Ken Loach, Steph Farmer and Trevor Hearing

Gordon Cooper

## Loach reflects with passion

drain of multiple rehearsals was the start of him wanting to work in a more spontaneous and authentic way, using untrained actors, and researching roles with those who do them as a day job.

Loach chats to Laverty daily, discussing a variety of topics, including football. Projects emerge from their shared interest in the struggle for social justice. A key takeaway from the event was that young

film-makers need to find someone they can work with. Loach emphasised that film-making is a collaborative endeavour.

Earlier, Dorset Equality Group's Sharen Green had talked with Loach about how he uses his work to highlight inequality in society.

Farmer said: "The world needs more film-makers like Ken Loach, who are able to put a magnifying glass to the injustices in our society through the lens of the everyday struggles of those who are suffering poverty and injustice and unable to get their voices heard."

Bournemouth University academic Trevor Hearing added: "It's so important for the next generation to... be inspired to tell stories that reflect real lives. Ken's inspirational career as a director has shown that film and TV can be powerful tools for change in our society."

The event was put on by Bournemouth University, Dorset Equality Group and RTS Southern Centre.

## Sky scoops Young Technologist prizes

Sky Post Production's Tatjana Radivoj has been named RTS Young Technologist of the Year, winning an all-expenses-paid trip to the International Broadcasting Convention in Amsterdam this month.

The audio mix technician has multiple credits across the TV genres, including *Landscape Artist of the Year* and *Rosie Molloy Gives Up Everything*.

Digital media consultant Terry Marsh, who chaired the RTS Young Technologist of the Year Award Jury, said: "Tatjana's rapid rise at Sky

since joining the company less than two years ago is hugely inspiring. She has demonstrated an excellent grasp of both the production requirements and the technology involved, while also devising improvements to the technology."

Radivoj said: "It is an exciting time in audio post-production; I look forward to... contributing to the future of technology in TV."

Rebecca Scott, a vision mixer at Sky Production Services, was the runner-up and received the Coffey



Tatjana Radivoj

Sky

Award for Excellence in Technology. She was part of the team that kept Sky's channels on air during the pandemic by using Cloud-based virtual galleries to enable broadcasts from home.

The RTS Young Technologist Award was established by the Society with funds from the family of broadcasting engineer AM Beresford-Cooke.

**Matthew Bell**



## Georgiou moves up as Dogra moves on

Congratulations to Andrew Georgiou, the new head of Warner Bros. Discovery's media business in the UK and Ireland. As well as TV networks, such as Discovery, TLC, Cartoon Network and Discovery+, he will oversee consumer products and home entertainment.

Andrew joined Discovery in 2019 to run Eurosport, and will continue as President and MD of WBD Sports Europe, which operates both Eurosport and TNT Sports.

He says: "With the football and rugby seasons kicking off and TNT Sports now live on all linear platforms and Discovery+ – the streaming home of TNT Sports in the UK and Ireland – there could not be a better time to get started."

Andrew's elevation is a result of restructuring following the surprise announcement that EMEA President and Managing Director Priya Dogra will depart at the end of the year after a remarkable 14 years at Warners.

Priya, of course, was a superlative chair of the RTS London Conference last year. Whatever she decides to do next, we wish her well.

## Jazzing things up for the Promenaders

It's that man again. The UpSide is referring to Clive Myrie, Network Presenter of the Year at March's RTS Television Journalism Awards.

His deep knowledge and love of jazz is well known: he has presented *The Definitive History of Jazz in Britain* for Jazz FM and *The Truth About Jazz* for the BBC World Service.

Of late, we've seen a different side to the music aficionado, as Clive has become a regular member of the Proms presenting team. His easy

authority and enthusiasm for classical music has been a delight for fans of the music festival, both old and new.

Clive is himself a musician, having learnt the violin and trumpet as a teenager.

## New face for The Film and TV Charity

A big shout out to sometime *Television* contributor Marcus Ryder, newly appointed as CEO of The Film and TV Charity. Most recently, he was Head of External Consultancies at the Sir Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity and has worked as a senior executive for the BBC.

We need no reminding of his tireless campaigning to increase the number of people of colour on both sides of the camera.

He says the charity is "an incredible source of support for people working behind the scenes across the film, TV and cinema industry, acting as a vital enabler for those facing disadvantage,

financial hardship and poor mental health".

## TV salutes nemesis of a toxic council

Finally, is there no end to the prolificacy of that doyen of screenwriting, Jack Thorne? His latest project, *Toxic Town*, commissioned by Netflix, tackles the timely subject of hazardous waste.

Starring Jodie Whittaker, Aimee Lou Wood, Robert Carlyle, Rory Kinnear and Brendan Coyle, the four-parter tells the story of Corby Borough Council's inept clean-up of the town's steelworks and how local women campaigned for compensation after their children were born with defects.

Jack said the "incredible story" would focus on "these funny, brave, incredible women and the way they scrapped for their children".

His credits include *His Dark Materials*, Channel 4 Covid drama *Help* and *Then Barbara Met Alan*. ■

## RTS EAST

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