

# TBI Television Business International

**Succession plans**  
HBO chief Casey  
Bloys on strategy,  
streaming & the future  
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**Console creations**  
What video game  
studios make of the  
TV adaptation trend  
Page 26



# FARAH



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Entertainment



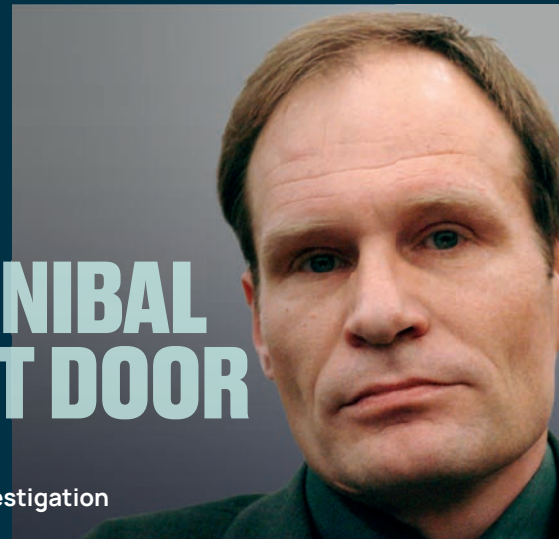
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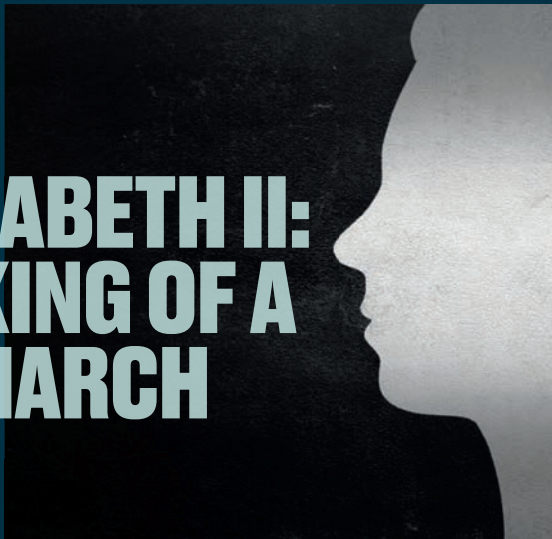


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# TBI April/May 2023

## Big stakes at play

**T**alking to Casey Bloys for this edition's TBI Interview, I had a sudden realisation that no one - not even the boss of HBO and a veteran of the business - knows quite how streaming will play out. Bloys was on fascinating form as he laid out the rationale behind Warner Bros. Discovery's new streamer (see page 16) and he was frank in admitting that the 'correction' is not done yet. The challenges facing Bloys' company are probably similar, give or take a few billion dollars, to the issues affecting yours though, as cost-cutting begins to bite and delays, or just cuts, in commissioning filters down through the global business.

There are positives, though: new players have come to town (check out page 20 for a deep dive on SkyShowtime with CEO Monty Sarhan) and there are ways to make sums add up, especially with some increasingly generous tax incentive schemes in Spain (page 22). We also flip the controls to find out how video game firms are tapping into the TV adaptation trend; dive into docuseries; uncover format gems from Southeast Asia; and explore how shortform factual is paying dividends in this rapidly evolving industry...



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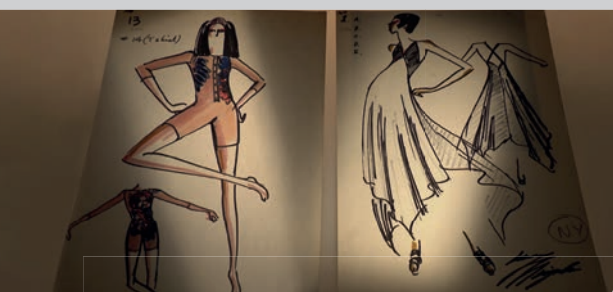
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# About Town

## Keeping it Series

Lille was once again the destination for European drama execs last month, as Series Mania Forum opened its doors to a record 3,800 delegates.

The event has become the must-attend scripted gathering for many, particularly with early stage projects, and there were plenty of networking opportunities provided. But there were also major execs in attendance, with a stellar line-up for the Lille Dialogues strand that included Amazon Prime Video's international chief James Farrell followed by HBO/HBO Max boss Casey Bloys. The latter's comments revolved around the fundamentals of streaming, namely how to make money, and stood in stark contrast to HBO Max sessions at the event's 2022 iteration, when the strategy across Europe was rather different to its current guise. There is no getting away from HBO's stellar run of recent years – from *The Last Of Us* to *Euphoria* – but Bloys was clear that streaming has to pay its way. What that means for scripted outside of the US remains to be seen.



There was also plenty of discussion around franchises from Farrell and Paramount+ international chief Marco Nobili, who both talked up the strategy of creating broad universes for shows such as *Citadel*, in Prime Video's case, and *Yellowstone* for Paramount. While the two execs committed to plenty of creativity in these worlds, it is hard to see a franchise frenzy providing more opportunities for local indies.

Once the talking stopped, parties and drinks started, while the public-facing Series Mania engaged tens of thousands at screenings across Lille, with stars such as *Succession*'s Brian Cox in town. But there was no getting away from the global economic headwinds that were brought into stark contrast by the battles between pension protestors and police, offering a sobering reminder for anyone caught up in the TV bubble.

## Winslet for the win

Kate Winslet, Billie Piper, Sarah Lancashire and Sharon Horgan were among British TV royalty who landed at London's Grosvenor House in March for the RTS Programme Awards 2023, where the BBC and Channel 4 snagged a bagful of awards for their respective shows. The BBC secured 17 wins, three of which were for the hit comedy series *Am I Being Unreasonable?*, while C4 secured six trophies, including two for its hit comedy *Derry Girls*. The BBC's version of *The Traitors* was also in among the prizes, while Winslet and Kit Connor took home leading actor prizes for *I Am Ruth* and *Heartstopper*, respectively.



## London laughs



London Screenings threw up plenty of parties for the 500+ buyers who flocked to the Big Smoke in late February, as a record number of companies joined the event to sell their wares. Up there with the best of the do's was Cineflix Rights' *Tempting Fortune*-themed soirée, which included a silent disco, colourful cocktails, stomach-filling canapes, a raffle, a bed for those too tired to talk any more, plus massages. And relax...

## Swings & Roundabouts

**11.4** WildBrain has forked out C\$15.5m (\$11.4m) for Toronto's House Of Cool, the animation firm behind Marvel's *What If...?*, as the trend of M&A and consolidation shows little sign of slowing just yet

**20** Amazon Prime Video alum Georgia Brown is joining 20 top UK-based industry executives to lead a British Film Institute-backed taskforce that is focused on solving ongoing labour shortages in the production sector

**34** Well-travelled motoring show *Top Gear* could be 34 seasons and out, after the BBC confirmed it would not be resuming filming following host Freddie Flintoff's crash last year that saw the former cricketer end up in hospital

**3** Disney's plan to cut \$3bn from its content spend has begun, with CEO Bob Iger outlining three waves of layoffs that look set to affect almost all its operations - among the first to be hit were Hulu, FX and creative acquisitions







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## Scripted Anthony Kimble

### Recognition & residuals

**Anthony Kimble, co-CEO of Arrested Industries, argues that corporate avarice is suffocating storytelling**

**T**his has been my first full awards season since relocating to Los Angeles and the first really in full flow since the pandemic. I didn't make it onto any of the red (or champagne coloured) carpets, but so many creative friends and colleagues did – all justly getting their moment of recognition for coming up with, writing, directing and producing content for the big behemoths of Hollywood.

Alongside the talent, the awards ceremonies bring out the suits from their executive floors and corner offices: the CEOs, CFOs, CMOs and COOs that love to bask in the glory of the creative machine – mostly without possessing a creative bone themselves. And that is, of course, fine. Our wider ecosystem needs all types of skillsets to make it function properly. But let's not forget, without the incredible talent of the writers and showrunners that they employ there would be nothing for them to hitch their wagon to and certainly no awards shows or glitzy galas.

As the SVOD bubble bursts and studios and platforms cancel shows and turn to an over-reliance on the reboot, any appetite for true creative risk seems to be going the way of the dodo. The only real drivers in our creative business appear to be the dollar signs and decimal points on the balance sheets of the big studios, all tightly controlled by these C-suite titans.

Cost vs creativity can be a delicate consideration – I'm not so naïve to think that balancing the books isn't important, especially during the tough times. But in the case of the likely writers' strike, surely it's an obvious case of biting the hand that feeds you and therefore hugely short-sighted? After all, writers are the start-point for virtually every programme that makes it on air; they provide the fuel for the engine. So, it's hardly fair they should be penalised when the industry keeps changing lanes, especially when they exert little or no control themselves.

At the core of the negotiations, ahead of the current contract with the AMPTP (Alliance of Motion Pictures and Television Producers) expiring on 1 May, is the issue of the sharp decline in residuals. Global streamers have taken an increasingly covetous stance on rights ownership and the broadcast orders of many series

that would have once been 20+ episodes a season have been halved to a more typical 10 episode run. The old-world order would mean that jobbing writers could rely on their residuals cheques to see them through leaner times. But now, the syndication market – even for shorter run series – has all but disappeared, with limited overseas sales once a show is on a global platform.

With writers on strike, Hollywood crumbles. The last writers' strike in 2007/08 lasted for 100 days and resulted in losses of more than \$2bn and countless jobs across the entertainment industry. And not just amongst creatives - catering, transportation, equipment rental. So many different businesses suffered. So as the Writers Guild of America (WGA) gears up for what look to be increasingly fraught negotiations with the AMPTP, everyone is worried. If the strike moves ahead, Hollywood will lose again.

There might be some winners though. I have been talking to lots of LA-based agents and many are planning on spending time in London and Canada over the next few months, looking to bolster their rosters with non-guild writers in a bid to mitigate risk and find ways to work around the imminent strike. Some of the bigger players have already future-proofed themselves by buying large UK talent firms: UTA recently acquired Curtis Brown and 42 Management recently divested a stake in the firm to Lionsgate.

This does of course present opportunities for overseas writers – but for Hollywood, it is a short-term fix for a longer-term problem. We need to come together and champion the real heroes of the small and silver screens – the writers, producers and brilliant creative minds that promote joy, bring people together and keep us entertained. Oh yes – and whose stories keep the wheels of the industry turning for us all.

As Charlie Kaufman (*Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind*) said in his extraordinary acceptance speech at the recent WGA Awards: "I have dropped the ball, I have wasted years seeking the approval of people with money. Don't get trapped in their world of box office numbers. You don't work for the world of box office numbers. You work for the world. Just make your story honest and tell it." **TBI**

Anthony Kimble is co-CEO and founder of Arrested Industries, overseeing its scripted operations from LA

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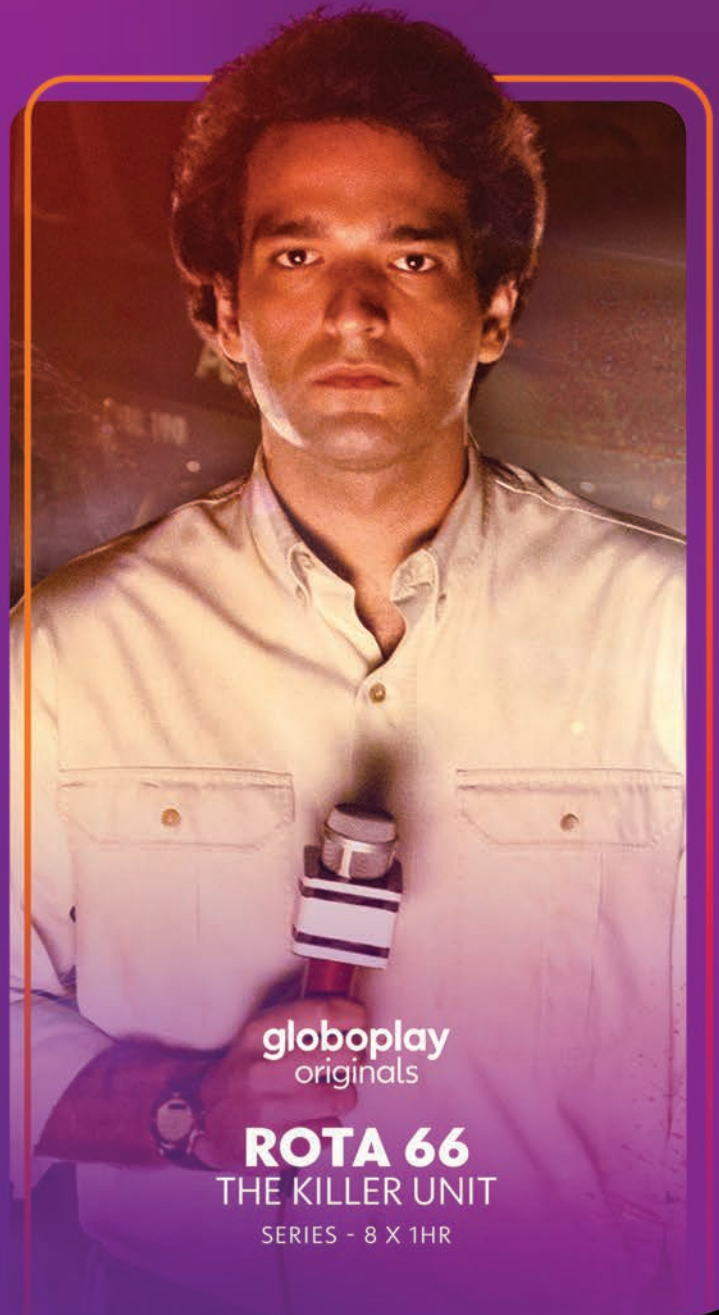
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## Formats Siobhan Crawford

### High Hopes for the MIPTV disco

**With MIPTV upon us, Siobhan Crawford casts her eye over the format highlights on offer in Cannes this year**

**I**t's MIPTV! God, I love this time of year and to set the tone, I have figured out the distributors' (and producers') anthem - it's Panic! At The Disco's classic, *High Hopes*.

Seriously, get your Spotify lyrics out and listen: "Had to have high, high hopes for a living... I was gonna be that one in a million". Obviously, it's talking about paper format commissioning - or Australian commissions, or US, UK - OK, all commissions!

Right, the good stuff - content. London Screenings already provided us with insights but lesser known are the indies:

- **Acun Medya** - fulfilling our need for daily content, dating format *Amor En El Aire* (local title) is coming hot from Azteca. Allowing single viewers at home to join the villa as new contestants is unique.

- **Be Entertainment** - *Destination X* was one of the hits of London Screenings and the competition reality has a lot of people talking (partly about how a bus can cost so much). *From Love To Yes In 24 Hours* was on the slate but slightly quiet.

- **Can't Stop** - A US format is coming. Less top secret, *The Unexpected Getaway* from France 2 takes three celebrities on a reflective getaway to dive into their lives.

- **D360** - Pushing ahead with recommissions of existing catalogue including *A Cut Above*, *Best In Miniature* and *Race Against The Tides*.

- **Eccholine** - The hub experts will be bringing four big formats (with very familiar branding on one). *The Box*, with its remote jungle in Colombia, is the headline, plus *Chefs Unlimited*.

- **Glow Media** - Yes, my company is launching *The Golden Egg*. If *Cash Or Trash* and *Deal Or No Deal* had an immersive studio baby this would be it. Plus our first co-dev with Phileas sees us launch *Love DisConnected!*

- **Lineup** - Leading the line-up is *For Sale For 100 Years*, one of Denmark's most binged shows, plus a few mysterious late editions may be added. Watch this space.

- **Media Ranch** - Coming in hot from Korea, *Round Table* has all the FOMO vibes as it comes from, you guessed it, Wonwoo Park. *The Story Of Us* is continuing to make noise after Belgian success.

- **Mediawan** - Israeli-US format *Hungry For Love* launched at the end of 2022 with a simple concept - you can't eat alone. The most proactive dating format ever.

- **Newen** - *Don't Stop The Music*, a new Dutch entertainment format introducing artists from the 1980s and 1990s to a younger audience in the ultimate music video. I am going to rave about this until we get a shiny US and a UK version!

- **Passion** - Aussie format *Better Date Than Never* has all the (buzzword) authentic *First Dates/Love On The Spectrum* feels, plus *One Night Stand* and *Best Worst Driver* are launching. And why do we love buses this year... *Tool Club* rounds out the titles.

- **Phileas** - *Can You Keep The Money?* is a new primetime development between Phileas and Wonwoo Park with MIP deals expected, plus gameshow *Cash In Cash Out*. Remember, hardest working man in TV.

- **Primitives** - Newly launched in Belgium, *Justice In Jail* will lead the launches with Irish recommission *The Toughest Team* and *Celebrity Retreat* joining the launches at *The Mole* house.

- **Propagate** - the hangover from *The Masked Singer* continues in new Fox Format Fund title *Celebrity Masterpiece*, which has just finished its first season on Workpoint in Thailand, plus Propagate have two renewals on Fox.

- **Rabbit** - *Travel Battle* is a hybrid studio and location production with good vibes as comedians compete to win the best travel experiences, with their trips revealed in studio. *Taskmaster* feels.

- **Talpa** - the firm is bringing a new format, chequebooks at the ready; *The Jump* is coming and should be greenlit by MIP - never has getting the answer wrong been so risky. Plus, *The Floor*.

- **TGC** - newly launched US distributor continues the roll out of (Canada's) *Ultimate Challenge*, foodies favourite *Fridge Wars* and *Parking Lot Payday*. Keeping hot news quiet but expect headlines during MIP.

So, go forth and enjoy the delights of Cannes. Brown Sugar awaits, the rude waiter service in the cafes, the heaven that is De Laura and the new Wit session, The Garden... I mean why would we ever stop coming to MIPTV? **TBI**

Siobhan Crawford is co-founder of Glow Media and has worked in the format business for almost two decades at firms including DRG, Zodiak, Banijay and Primitives



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## Diversity Deborah Williams

### Shining a light

**“Data by itself doesn’t change the dial - we need large-scale, industry-wide action to demolish cultures, behaviours and bad habits”**

**M**arch has been an incredibly dark month – both literally and metaphorically. The days here in the UK were gloomy and the rain ceaseless. London has seemed empty at times and progress at work has been slow.

I set out writing this column with the aim of celebrating and championing our activity, and looking forward taking up my invite from the organisers of MIPTV to travel to Cannes and talk to delegates about disability and accessibility, as we continue to grow our work to make the wider industry more inclusive.

I had hoped to attend Canneseries for the first time – something I’ve wanted to do since I started in this role. While the market overall may not be as large as MIPCOM, it’s sometimes the small things that bring and drive change, and it would have been a good opportunity to continue our disability inclusion debates, rollout and conversation.

But sadly, it’s not to be. Budgets and diaries will not allow it. And I’ve also received a stark reminder that I’m a disabled person and that the economic impact of an inaccessible industry and wider world on someone like me is mammoth.

I recently read the third report from the Film and TV Charity about mental health in the UK’s screen industries. While it says there has been change and that some people are feeling better, it still tells a bleak story.

We still have working conditions and processes that are antiquated and unfit for the 21st Century. We still have practices and behaviours that inhibit ambition and creativity. We still have language that is so discriminatory that people are too scared to request time out for wellbeing or caring for fear they will never work again, or be labelled ‘awkward’ and too much like hard work.

I am passionate about collecting and publishing data. Doing this nationally and internationally for the last 10 years has been core to my work and who I am.

But sometimes I’m forced to ask myself: What is the point? Are we just collecting and publishing for the sake of it? Where is it taking us?

Whether it’s diversity statistics, mental health surveys or gender pay-gap reporting, we publish the data and pat ourselves on the back, but don’t look up or into the future.

What do we need and want our industry to be in 20, 30 or 40 years from now? Who will be leading the content charge? How are we creating a path for what is next?

Are we leaving it to ChatGPT or another other AI technology to have the same creativity and ambition as a lone person grappling with ideas that are too big to stay inside their heads?

Data by itself doesn’t change the dial. We need large-scale industry-wide action to demolish cultures, behaviours and bad habits.

And we also need what I call the ‘seers’ – the creative minded people with crystal balls who can see past the blockages. Someone prepared to place disabled people at the centre of change and who shares my disappointment at what the statistics and analysis in CDN’s reports reveal year after year; someone who wants to grab the industry by the neck and shake new life into it.

And if it’s too much for one, then a few. The Access Project (TAP) came together off the back of CDN’s Diamond data being published in 2021. Perhaps they’ll be able to make the breakthrough and force change in budgeting, facilities, location, contracting, writing and directing.

Will it spread? Will we be able to have a grown-up, deep discussion internationally about these issues this year? Or will the hope we have for change slowly dissipate and disappear when the industry sinks back down to its usual behaviour?

Like I said, dark times but perhaps we can together shine a light? **TBI**

Deborah Williams is executive director at the UK’s Creative Diversity Network (CDN) and has worked in arts, culture and the creative industries for more than three decades

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## Legal Julian Wilkins

# Regulating AI - TV's next big challenge?

**“AI is awakening legislators across the world to consider how best to harness the technology’s benefits without it going unchecked”**

**T**echnologies such as NFTs and the Metaverse are having greater prevalence on the TV industry, affecting how we view programming and our interaction with shows. But arguably the biggest recent technology development has been AI (Artificial Intelligence), which remains pretty unregulated.

AI used by content providers such as Netflix or Spotify ensure they get viewer preferences right - it enables personalised recommendations for viewing or listening. AI is also enabling content creation itself: for example, video game software already enables ‘worlds’ in which some characters’ behaviour is partially created in real time by AI. This application of AI is likely to further types of content and immersive experiences.

There will also be increased use of smart contracts with AI to help finalise commercial transactions, while other examples include AI edited trailers, special effects (such as the de-aging in *The Irishman*) and script analysis like the Bechdel test.

So is AI a blessing or a curse? Some concerns have been expressed that AI can lead to false news narratives. Recently, AI generated avatars on the House of News YouTube channel presented an English-speaking presenter giving a narrative that promoted Venezuela’s president Maduro’s regime.

The law seems to be playing catch up, although remarkably, common law jurisdictions are making good use of addressing some abuses of new tech, such as crypto finance. The much-needed Online Harms Bill awaits Royal Assent as Parliament seeks magic bullet answers to fast moving technology. One is minded of Winston Churchill saying: “It is better to do something than to do nothing while waiting to do everything.”

AI, however, is awakening legislators across the world to consider how best to harness the benefits without it going unchecked and creating what some see as a technology with unbridled control.

The UK government’s recent AI White Paper outlines five clear principles that regulators, like

Ofcom, should consider to best facilitate the safe and innovative use of AI in the industries they monitor. The five principles or categories include safety, security and robustness; and transparency and explainability. Also, fairness whereby AI should be used to ensure compliance with the UK’s existing laws, for example the Equality Act 2010 or UK GDPR, and it must not discriminate against individuals or create unfair commercial outcomes. AI is very data rich and how it functions is determined by the quality of data and application.

Further, accountability and governance so that regulation is more collaborative than prescriptive, determining whether the risk warrants an intervention.

Finally, contestability and redress to ensure individuals have the opportunity to dispute harmful outcomes or decisions generated by AI.

Law makers are chasing technology that is constantly evolving so in the UK at least, the aforementioned White Paper proposes a £2m (\$2.5m) sandbox fund to provide a safe trial environment whereby businesses can test how regulation could be applied to AI products and services, as well as support innovators bringing new ideas to market without having inappropriate regulation thwarting innovation.

As AI is universal, the White Paper encourages international co-operation. The UK is an active member of the OECD’s Working Party on AI Governance (AIGO). Some US states have introduced legislation regulating aspects of AI and Federal law is expected in 2023, whilst in September 2022, the EU introduced its AI liability directive. Differences are already beginning to show between nations in how they intend to regulate.

AI’s application will increase within the TV industry. The government consultation period on the White Paper ends on 21 June, 2023. I recommend the TV industry to contribute their views to ensure the technology and consequential laws are more friend than foe. **TBI**

Julian is a consultant solicitor and notary public with Eldwick Law, and a founding member of mediation and arbitration practice Q Chambers



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## HBO's new playbook

HBO and HBO Max chairman & president Casey Bloys tells Richard Middleton why the 'Netflix correction' was necessary, how international fits into the WBD strategy and his unlikely love for *Chopped*

**T**wo things about Casey Bloys that you might not know: he is a self-confessed *Chopped* addict despite having a particular dislike of cooking; and he's no gamer.

Another detail that frequently gets glossed over is that the HBO & HBO Max chairman & president studied economics at university. He knows numbers.

He also knows HBO inside out. Bloys is coming up to the two-decade anniversary of his time at the company, a stretch that began in the midst of seminal shows, *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*.

In more recent years, and more directly under his stewardship, HBO has managed to maintain a steady stream of hits that have stood out despite the barrage of quantity flooding the market. From *Game Of Thrones*, *House Of The Dragon* and *Succession*, to *The Last Of Us* and *White Lotus*, there have been forgotten flops but they tend to get lost among the towering highs.

Some things haven't changed – his closest team at HBO also have long affiliations with the brand and there's still that iconic 'aah' musical ident that you

can hear right now in your head and which retains the power to send an excited buzz down the spine (although, it doesn't seem to have a name).

But the turbulence affecting HBO's flight has been constant over recent years: from AT&T to WarnerMedia and now Warner Bros. Discovery, owners have come and gone, as streaming has upended the industry. HBO has remained but the question now, as the landscape shifts again, seems to be, what's next?

"Sometimes people seem to worry about HBO on our behalf and I'm like, "It's OK, we feel good about this," says Bloys, who – perhaps rather uniquely given his position as one of the industry's top US execs – comes across as a genuinely likeable person. More importantly, it's a view shared by many in the industry.

Having that in the bank is probably no bad thing, given the fairly unpleasant decisions Bloys and WBD have been making over the past year. There have been swinging cuts to content and staff, both in the US and globally, but the HBO topper is clear that there is now a singular focus: streaming has to pay.

*The Last Of Us* is HBO's most recent new launch to have landed with global audiences

## A 'dot-com' style correction

"Everybody is trying to work it out," he says, admitting that Netflix has a head start on others. The industry turmoil that followed the "Netflix correction" last year – which saw billions of dollars wiped off the share prices of media firms – reminded Bloys of the Dot-com crash in 2000, he adds.

"That [period] was so crazy, the valuations were so high and everybody was saying, 'no, no, no, it's a new paradigm.' But having gone through that and having now gone through this, you can be sure eventually that the point, in any business, is to make money."

And the correction was important, Bloys says, because "it brought everybody to their senses. [WBD CEO] David [Zaslav] was ahead of this. He was the one saying, 'OK, how do we make money?'"

A key aspect remains around how shows are windowed, the HBO veteran says. "For HBO, we sold and made a lot of money from selling DVD's. We also syndicated shows like *Sex And The City*, *The Sopranos*, *Entourage*, *Band Of Brothers*. That has always been an aspect of the business.

"What changed with streaming was the idea that you would spend massive amounts of money on these shows – which aren't cheap – and then leave them in a library for eternity for \$15 a month. Investors started to realise it didn't add up.

"That's what you're seeing now with the upheaval in the industry – how are we going to produce these shows, how are we going to put them out and make money. That is very much up in the air right now."

Bloys and WBD hope that a consolidated streamer – combining Discovery+ shows and HBO Max programming – might be the answer.

"HBO used to be next to a wide array of programming, it lived [on cable] happily for many years. Obviously, that business is more challenged but the point of the cable bundle, and what we are now seeing streamers go to, is to have the widest array of programming possible to bring people in keep them."

Bloys reflects on his own viewing habits and says the key is to "build out" the offering.

"The theory of the case, and why I think it makes sense, is that a lot of the shows that Discovery brings are programmes I watch – there are home renovation shows, *House Hunters*, there's the Food Network.

"I don't even like cooking but my kids got me into *Chopped*. Seriously, I don't like cooking at all but I really got into it. The point is that when people watch TV, they are in a different state of mind and you want shows to do different things, that is what the cable bundle used to do."

**"The correction brought everybody to their senses but David Zaslav was ahead of this - he was the one saying, 'OK, how do we make money?'"**

Casey Bloys



*Succession's* fourth and final season is being released weekly around the world

Streamers plotting the future must now do something similar, Bloys says, and "that is what this new service will do." But what about diluting the HBO brand?

"I'm not worried about HBO within that bundle - we survived on cable with lots of other programming around us. In this new offering, HBO will always have a special place highlighted within it."

And, more importantly: "For the long-term health of HBO, we have to figure out a broad streaming world. We have to work out how to make streaming work, meaning how do we do this and make money."

## Tapping in tentpoles

Part of the "broadening out" plan lies in shows that extend beyond the HBO viewer, Bloys says. On the domestic US side, it could mean diving into internal resources for existing IP.

"We are very lucky to be part of Warner Bros. Discovery, because Warner Bros. itself has a lot of IP that we can use, the biggest examples being DC, with James [Gunn] and Peter [Safran] running that side.

"We did *Peacemaker* and we've got Colin Farrell in *The Penguin*, plus we have the *Dune* and *IT* prequels, so there are lots of places to go for those big broadcast tentpole shows. That is what we are doing with Max."

And while *The Last Of Us* has almost single-handedly reignited the video game adaptation market, Bloys says there is no rush to find another piece of console-related IP to adapt.

"I knew the video game but I'm not a gamer at all. The decision wasn't, 'Here's a big property so it must have a big built in audience, so therefore let's develop it and turn it into a TV show', which I think is the wrong way to develop something."

It was instead because Craig Mazin, who Bloys worked with on *Chernobyl*, had brought it to him. "We said to him after *Chernobyl*, 'tell us when you find a



thing that you want to do’, and he came to us and said, *Last Of Us*. That said, I was interested in it being a big world and I wanted to see what Craig would do with that.” (Read more about game adaptations on p26.)

But was there any fear that the show would simply join the myriad other poorly executed video game adaptations out there?

“To be honest, it wasn’t until the show came out and I was doing press that everybody started talking to me about the long history of failed video game adaptations. It wasn’t really my genre and I didn’t really think about it.”

For HBO, as opposed to the broader HBO Max remit, things have not changed, Bloys adds somewhat cryptically. “I’ve been here 19 years and most of my team have been here for that or longer and the key is there is no new mandate for HBO - there is no major change, we will just continue to do what we’re doing.”

That means “new takes, pushing boundaries, greenlighting shows you haven’t seen before.” But while the top US domestic team might not have changed too much, the international operation has.

Numerous execs were let go around the world last year, including most of the HBO Europe team, as WBD cut its spending and global commissioning plans. Bloys says the aim now is for the US and international teams to become more connected, with the latter operating under WBD International chief, Gerhard Zeiler.

“When it was just HBO, [US] domestic worked very independently from international. So you had programming teams making their own decisions and really as business units, they were totally separately.

“Now you have - with Discovery - a much larger operation. What we are trying to do from a programming point of view is to work with Gerhard’s team and to think about programming globally.

“The left hand [now] knows what the right hand is doing, so it will be more coordinated. We’ll be making better decisions about where to invest and about how much to invest.”

Zeiler, who like Bloys reports into WBD chief Zaslav, adds that the programme spend is being “figured out” but says non-US spend remains considerable.

“I have a big domestic investment pot, Gerhard has a fairly sizeable international investment [pot] too, and it is about trying to work it out by saying, “OK, we are putting all this money into programming, where is it best to put our money. Where are we betting? And now, we are doing that together.”

There is little detail on just where spending will land and Bloys swerves providing any detail on just how big the international pot is. “Let me give you Gerhard’s number,” he jokes.

But there are suggestions that relatively lower cost international fare will retain its place on the slate and

Bloys points to “successful co-productions” in the UK with the BBC, Sky and Channel 4.

“From a creative point of view, we’ve had very good relationships with most of the UK broadcasters, but in terms of sharing streaming windows, that is a very different conversation,” he says as discussion turns to rights and flexibility.

Shows in the guise of *My Brilliant Friend*, co-produced with Rai in Italy, could provide a framework for the future though, it seems. “I love *My Brilliant Friend*, it’s great, I’m very proud of it and as a co-production it is economically feasible for us, so I’m not worried it isn’t a blockbuster [in the US].



*My Brilliant Friend* was co-produced by HBO and Italian pubcaster Rai

“*My Brilliant Friend* can exist because it is beautiful, well produced, it has great reviews and because it is a co-production it doesn’t cost us comparatively as much as other shows. You always have to make that trade off.

“I look at the slate at HBO and HBO Max as one big thing. And I don’t just want a slate of *House Of Dragons* and *Last of Us*, I don’t want just tentpoles - it’s not as interesting as a slate that contains *My Brilliant Friend*, *Barry*, *I May Destroy You*. You want that range.

“And shows don’t have to just be audience plays, they can be good for the HBO brand. They can be good for Awards, they can get great reviews and those things matter - you just have to balance them.”

The potential of a US writers strike could also throw up more opportunities internationally, but Bloys weaves around the subject. “I don’t like to predict [if it will happen] because I have no idea,” he says matter of fact. “It will not be fun or easy for anybody, all you can do is prepare, have as many scripts as possible and get things into production.” In the meantime, Bloys has the launch of WBD’s new combined streamer to worry about. That, and just how to navigate the ongoing turmoil around streaming. “It feels like we are right in the middle of it – the industry is a bit in the dark and we are all trying different approaches.” **TBI**



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## Ready & waiting

SkyShowtime is the new(ish) kid on the streaming block in Europe. Irene Jiménez speaks to CEO Monty Sarhan about parental responsibilities, windowing & local programming potential

**C**reated for the European market, SkyShowtime is in some ways the streamer of our times – a pragmatic product from parents, Comcast and Paramount Global.

The streamer completed its roll-out in late February by launching in Spain and Andorra, with a footprint that now stretches far and wide: from Albania, Croatia and Poland in the East; to Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland in the North; and the Netherlands and Portugal further West and South. In total, it reaches more than 90 million households across 20 countries.

The catalogue is based on series and movies from Comcast and Paramount-owned entities, including Universal Pictures and Paramount Pictures, but also Paramount+, Showtime, Sky Studios and Peacock.

For SkyShowtime's CEO Monty Sarhan, the "breadth and depth" of shows from the Comcast and Paramount-owned catalogues is key,

with the streamer's chief reeling off US titles such as *Yellowstone*, *Tulsa King* and *Halo* among available IP.

But local originals also have a big part to play and are in the works under former BBC Studios exec Jon Farrar, whose team is expanding. Sarhan has been touring Europe over recent months to launch the service and his last stop was Madrid, where the local team, led by VP & regional GM of Iberia, Raquel Berzosa, threw a party around *Bosé*, the biopic of famous Spanish author and singer Miguel Bosé. It was first launched on Paramount+ in the US in November but has also been labelled as a SkyShowtime original.

"We feel that local originals are incredibly important," Sarhan tells TBI, "especially because we are a service created for Europe and dedicated to these markets. People want stories that they can relate to, that are meaningful, that are authentic."

*A Town Called Malice* (opposite) will head to SkyShowtime when existing contacts expire, while original series *Bosé* (right) first launched on Paramount+ in the US

## Original visions

The CEO, who was previously SVP of content acquisitions at Comcast Cable, adds that it is “too early” to say how many exclusive productions SkyShowtime will produce and launch per year. The platform is, he adds, “in the process of ramping up, we are building the teams across our seven offices and we will have original programming executives throughout Europe committed to bringing the best content. We are already speaking to production companies, writers and showrunners about bringing original series to market.”

Among the companies belonging to Comcast and Paramount Global is US-based Spanish-language brand Telemundo and Sarhan says the streamer is “talking to them about projects.” There also conversations being held with VIS (ViacomCBS International Studios), which produces in Spain, Italy, Germany, the UK and the US, and the CEO talks up the considerable production might at his disposal.



**“Building an audience over time and creating conversation happens when you drop one episode per week – not dropping the entire series all at once”**

Monty Sarhan, SkyShowtime

“We are incredible lucky to have shareholders that are two of the largest production companies in the world and which produce content not only in the US and UK, but throughout the world,” says Sarhan.

All genres are of interest, the exec continues, adding that he is open to different models. “When you are launching a new service, it is more about finding the best stories. Some of these stories may be co-productions, some may be developed in-house and there might be acquisitions. We are less focused on what the business model is and more focused on storytelling.”

## Picking up HBO’s baton

Underlining SkyShowtime’s pragmatic approach to deal-making was its eyebrow-raising acquisition of 21 HBO Max Europe originals earlier this year (totalling 168 episodes that run to 150+ hours). Shows are being rebranded as SkyShowtime originals and include three brand-new series that have completed production and will have their world premiere on the service in 2023: *ID* (Finland and Sweden), *The Winner* (Czech Republic and Slovakia), and *Warszawianka* (Poland).

The second season of Spanish comedy series *Por H O Por B* was also included and, for Sarhan, it was a “landmark deal”, which also hands SkyShowtime the option to acquire worldwide rights on any renewed shows as well as an option on new seasons for several series.

Yet the existence of the streamer is set to fragment the content offering across Europe even more: dramas such as Showtime’s



*Yellowjackets* and Nickelodeon’s kids series *Paw Patrol* are available in Europe through different pay-TV services and channels at present, but, when the pre-existing contractual agreements expire, SkyShowtime will become the home for programming from Paramount+, Peacock, Sky Studios, Showtime, and other labels. It means another influx of programming, ranging from Sky’s *A Town Called Malice* to Paramount+ film adaptation *Fatal Attraction*, as well as *Grease: Rise Of The Pink Ladies*, *Lioness* and *Rabbit Hole*.

## ‘Create conversation, build interest’

There will also be less binging with SkyShowtime and more considered consumption, and the aim, Sarhan says, is to premiere episodes for new shows on a weekly basis.

“There might be some cases when we may drop two episodes at launch, but we believe in building an audience over time and growing the audience, creating conversation and generating interest,” he explains of the strategy. “And that happens when you drop one episode per week versus dropping the entire series all at once.”

As part of the launch campaign, SkyShowtime has also offered a ‘half-price for life’ discount for a limited time. In the case of the Spanish market, it meant a competitive fee of €2.99 (\$3.26) per month, the cheapest SVOD monthly subscription in the country, where Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, HBO Max, Disney+, AMC+, Apple TV+ and numerous other national platforms operate.

“The discount is performing tremendously well so far,” Sarhan says. “Our everyday price is lower than Netflix’s, Disney+’s, HBO Max’s.”

London-based Sarhan is also clear when asked about the volume business – the pillar of many streaming platforms, at least, so far.

“We are all about quality - quality trumps quantity. Richard Plepler [former chairman & CEO at HBO] used to say, ‘more is not better, only better is better’.

“We subscribe to that same philosophy, especially nowadays, when we are living in an attention economy where people spend countless hours looking for something to watch.

“SkyShowtime wants to be the place that welcomes audiences because they know that they can find something of quality to watch. It is about curation, about content that is meaningful to audiences. We don’t want to be in the volume business. We just want to be the home for great content and stories.” **TBI**

# Serving up Spain

Spain and its regions have made headlines with new tax incentives schemes to attract global productions. Irene Jiménez makes sense of what's on offer for international companies

**I**talian filmmaker Sergio Leone's spaghetti western movies might have landed in Almería 50 years earlier, but it was *Game Of Thrones* that ultimately put Spain on the international map of audiovisual production.

The HBO drama was shot in different locations between seasons five and eight, with Madrid-based VFX firm El Ranchito creating the white walkers crowd and Khaleesi's dragons in season seven.

And while *Game Of Thrones* became a calling card for Spain's production industry, it also convinced local authorities to create an attractive tax incentive system. After years of negotiations, 2023 has borne some considerable fruit, with the country's film and TV industry now recognised as a strategic economic sector by the Spanish government.

## Sorting out the specifics

From 1 January, any foreign producer shooting in Spain can benefit from a 30% tax rebate for the first €1m (\$1m) of deductible expenditures, and a 25% rebate beyond that. It applies to films and series, and is valid across live-action or animation, fiction or documentary (see box-out on page 24 for more details).

What makes Spain's incentive schemes more complicated, but also so competitive, is that aside from the national program, there are three territories with their own tax laws and higher tax rebates.

Basque Country and Navarre offer a 35% via tax credit, while the Canary Islands grant a 50% tax rebate for the first €1m and 45% onwards. In the case of the archipelago, the cap of the deduction is €36m for each production, while for TV series, the cap is €18m per episode, with no limit on the number of episodes.

And the islands have already proven alluring to producers. In recent years, high-budget series such as Apple TV's *Foundation*, Netflix's *The Witcher* and Prime Video's *Jack Ryan* have chosen the Canary Islands to shoot.

Both Gran Canaria and Tenerife have also become attractive animation hubs, with several studios serving European and US productions such as Netflix's *Arcane* and Disney's *Tara Duncan*. The Canary Islands Special

Zone (ZEC) also allows companies to set up in the region at a reduced rate of 4% on corporate income tax, which is compatible with the previously mentioned tax relief schemes.

## Race for rates

While that might sound tempting, Bizkaia, a province in the Basque Country, has decided to increase its bet with a 60% tax credit for national and international productions, if expenses in the territory surpass 50% of the total production cost.

The tax credit will be 50% if expenses are between 30-50%; and 40% if expenses are 20-30%. Bizkaia also offers a 35% tax credit overall and an additional 10% if the production is shot in the Basque language.

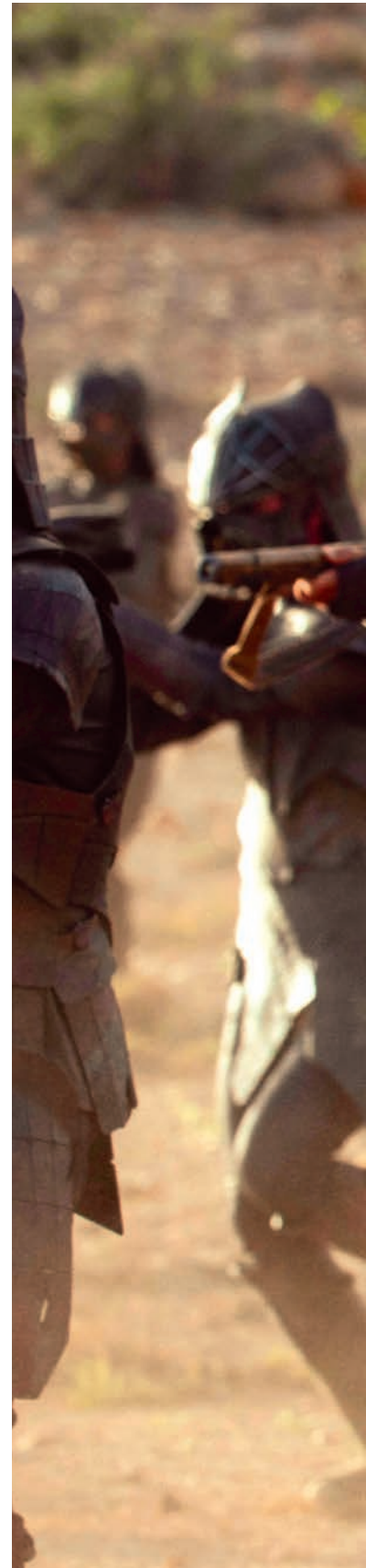
The consequences of these game-changer tax credits are yet to be seen – the territory totals only 2,200 square kilometres – but several national companies are already establishing tax residence there to benefit.

As the race to compete heats up, Guipúzcoa and Álava, the other two Basque Country provinces, are also revising their tax laws in order to put them at the same level as Bizkaia, retroactively since 1 January, 2023. And these regions have form in production: *Game Of Thrones*'s castle, Dragonstone, was set in San Juan de Gaztelugatxe (Bizkaia), and Disney+'s upcoming series *Balenciaga*, the biopic of the famous haute couture designer, has been shot mainly in the Basque Country.

"Spain is a decentralised country, that is why we have different tax laws, and that is why I am almost hoarse at the end of international markets such as MIPCOM or AFM, after days spreading the word about our tax advantages", says a smiling Fabia Buenaventura, head of the Audiovisual Department at ICEX Invest in Spain, the public agency that boosts the internationalisation of Spanish companies and helps international companies to establish in Spain.

Buenaventura adds that questions about shooting in Spain have increased significantly since December 2022, when the hike in the tax rebate was confirmed,

Apple series *Foundation* is just one of several high-budget shows that have been partly shot in the Canary Islands







“especially from producers based in the US, the Nordics, Germany, Australia and South Africa.”

Spain, she adds, is now competing on the international stage to secure productions, with an eight-part drama with a €3.5m budget per episode (€28m in total) being able to benefit from a €7m rebate, considering the national rate of 30% (if all expenses are eligible).

## First steps...

There are two essential requirements for being able to access the Spanish tax rebate system: the first is hiring a Spanish production service company; and the second, is having the Spanish Cultural Certificate granted by the public Institute of Cinematography and Audiovisual Arts (ICAA is its Spanish acronym). Employing a percentage of local staff, as long as they are residents of the European Economic Area (EEA), is another requirement to keep in mind.

And while a 30% tax rebate may not sound mind-blowing – it is about average for Europe but below the 40% of Italy and Greece – Spain is compensating this with more measures.

There is a greater level of legal certainty and a new legal framework that simplifies the administrative procedures for granting visas to professionals and their families. The latter is especially attractive following the difficulties introduced by Brexit in the UK, which is a traditional hot spot for international productions. Spain also has international co-production agreements with 18 countries and has always tended to be a cost-effective country compared to the rest of Europe.



**“Spain is a decentralised country, that is why we have different tax laws, and that is why I am almost hoarse at the end of int’l markets”**

Fabia Buena Ventura, ICEx Invest in Spain

Spain has also developed a consolidated and growing network of production service companies. Earlier this year, three national prodcos – Bambú Producciones, Filmmax and Brutal Media – launched a service division and joined Profilm, the association of international production service companies with more than 15 members, representing 90% of the whole sector.

“Spain was one of the first countries in the world to resume film and TV production after lockdown”, adds Fernando Victoria de Lecea, president of Profilm.

Although it does not have any special tax rebates, the region of Madrid concentrates the highest number of production service companies and crew members, behind and in front of the camera.

Indeed, the biggest European production hub for Netflix is located in the region, with ten sets and post-production facilities. There is also Peris Costumes, a globally known costume rental firm with 11 million garments in its catalogue, some of which have appeared on shows such as *The Crown* and *Emily In Paris*.

## Further expansion

With a new national tax incentive scheme, and competitive rates on a regional basis, Spain is finding itself with increased demand.

As this grows, and following requests from many international producers, the Spanish public and private sectors are now working on new studio facilities. One of the latest openings is Gran Canaria Studios, a 6,000 sqm audiovisual complex, made up of two sets with attached facilities, built by the regional government of the island after a €9.6m (\$10m) investment.

Gran Canaria Studios will have a virtual production studio in the coming months, thanks to the NextGeneration EU funds. The public recovery plan, which aims to transform European economies, will allow more virtual production stages to be set up in other parts of the peninsula, such as Galicia and Murcia. There are also ambitious projects in the works in Madrid and Barcelona to host a virtual production studio.

Also preparing its relaunch is Ciudad de la Luz, the film studio located in Alicante that has been closed for ten years following a suspension imposed by the European Union for the illegal financing of its construction. The regional government achieved a shortened sanction and it is now reopening its 120,000 sqm facilities, divided into six sets, including a water tank.

For international producers, key contacts can be found at the Spain Audiovisual Bureau, a one-stop shop, available online and on the phone, that provides information about shooting in the country. There is also the *Who Is Who Guide – Shooting In Spain*, an annually updated directory of national service companies. The Spain Film Commission, a network of 41 film offices and film commissions, also cover the country and can offer assistance.

There are, of course, challenges too. In line with the recent international boom of film and TV production, Spain is suffering from crew shortages and teams with agendas booked up months in advance. There are also concerns that life is becoming more difficult for domestic productions, as national producers – not so interested in a service economy – ask for more protection.

Nevertheless, Spain is open for business but, as a piece of advice, prepare your shooting in advance. **TBI**

## National incentives

Here are the conditions for Spain’s national tax rebate scheme: The deduction cap is €20m for each production, while a TV series limit of €10m per episode applies, with no limit on the number of episodes. The total amount of aid and deductions may not exceed 50% of the production cost. The total cost of the production must be at least €2m and eligible expenditure cannot exceed 80% of that cost. Also, the minimum expenditure in Spanish territory must be €1m, which is reduced to €200,000 in the case of animation productions. Regarding VFX services, when the producer is in charge of the execution of visual effects services and the expenses incurred in Spanish territory are less than €1m, they may obtain a 30% deduction.



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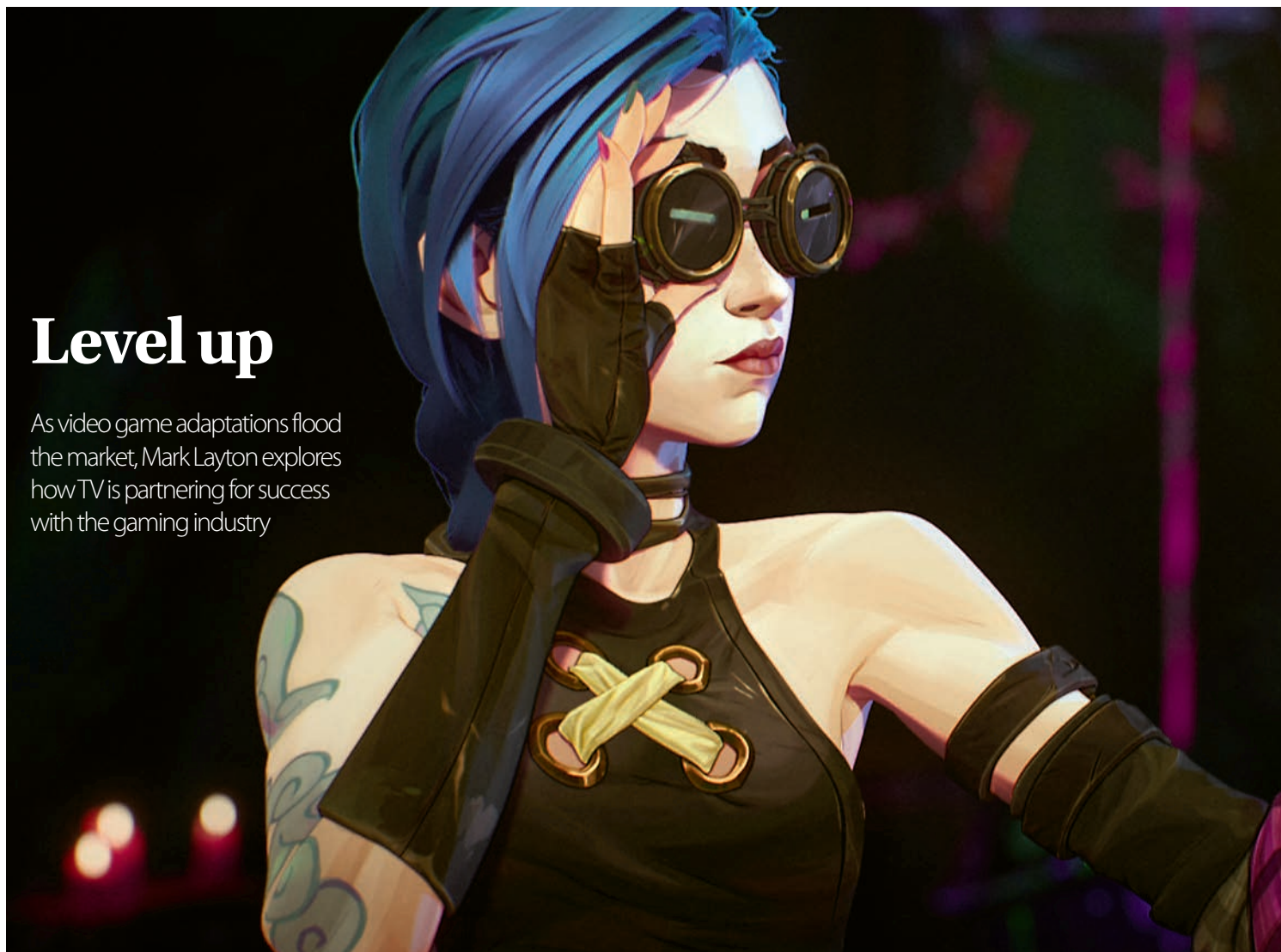
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## Level up

As video game adaptations flood the market, Mark Layton explores how TV is partnering for success with the gaming industry



**S**tigmatised for decades as a synonym for commercial failure, video game adaptations for TV and film have finally managed to shed this running punchline and emerge among the hottest of properties.

Recent triumphs such as HBO's *The Last Of Us* and Netflix's *Arcane* have helped to banish embarrassing memories of historic duds like '90s show *Mortal Kombat: Conquest* and the much-maligned *Super Mario Bros.* film.

Global video game adaptations soared by 47% from 2021 to 2022, according to analyst firm Omdia, and streamers are now increasing investments in bringing games to screens as high-end, live-action series – rather than simply animations, which shows such as *Pokémon* had long since proved possible.

It is *The Last Of Us* that has been dominating water cooler talk over the last few months, with the

*Arcane* (above) was adapted from *League Of Legends*, while *Mythic Quest* (opposite) is made in partnership with French gaming studio Ubisoft

HBO series produced by Sony Pictures Television, alongside Naughty Dog, creators of the original 2013 game, as well as The Mighty Mint, Word Games and PlayStation Productions.

The post-apocalyptic drama was an instant ratings hit for the US network and one of its biggest shows to date. But HBO & HBO Max chief Casey Bloys tells TBI that this doesn't mean he's now out shopping for more gaming IP.

"My experience [with *The Last Of Us*] would not lead me to say great, now go find other video games. The success here was saying here is a writer we believe in, what do you want to do? If the next Craig Mazin [the series' co-showrunner] comes in and says, here's a magazine article I want to develop, then great. It was not video game specific."

The wider industry, however, may not entirely agree, given the sheer quantity of video game adaptations



currently in various stages of development, ranging from *Fallout* for Amazon Prime Video to *Twisted Metal* for Peacock, indicating shifting headwinds.

While mileage has varied, already launched shows such as *Halo* for Paramount+ and *Resident Evil* for Netflix are among the tip of an approaching iceberg of live-action series, while animated titles based on video games are going from strength to strength.

### Gain an extra life

To the gaming studios, it seems obvious why the TV sector is taking increased notice in the content and experiences they are creating. “AAA video games are very close to TV series (not movies) in terms of creating complex narratives and building strong relationships between in-game characters and gamers/audience, which is a great foundation to build on,” says Bartosz Szybor, comic book and animation narrative director at CD Projekt Red, the Polish video game developer behind *Cyberpunk 2077*.

The game was adapted by Studio Trigger into last year’s well-received Netflix prequel anime *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners* – with Szybor serving as writer and producer.

Margaret Boykin, VP of Ubisoft Film & Television, meanwhile, tells TBI that 2.3 billion people play video games worldwide (other sources suggest this figure is considerably higher), with that number increasing by 16% year on year. As such, it is “no surprise” that TV is looking to tap into such an established fanbase.

But it’s not a one-way street. The interest is clearly mutual, as LA-based Boykin works for the production company subsidiary of French video game publisher Ubisoft, dedicated to turning the firm’s games into TV

series and films.

In 2021, Ubisoft struck a far-reaching partnership with Netflix to produce a swathe of video game adaptations, including (among others): animated shows based on the *Far Cry* and *Tom Clancy’s Splinter Cell* franchises; a film based on *Tom Clancy’s The Division*; and separate live-action and anime shows inspired by historical sci-fi series *Assassin’s Creed*.

“[Netflix is] the perfect platform for that kind of big, world-building storytelling,” says Boykin, and indeed, the streamer has more video game adaptations in the works than any of its competitors.

This is chiefly down to its partnership with Ubisoft Film & Television, and the company’s Paris-based MD, Helene Juguet, sheds light on the gaming firm’s flexibility when it comes to how rights to its franchises are handled.

“Our focus will always be to bring the best possible creative take to our productions and therefore to partner with the best partners possible for each brand – in terms of development, production or distribution,” says Juguet.

“That means that sometimes we will fully produce projects, while other times we may license. It really is a choice based on how to bring the most value to our creations and ultimately our franchises.”

### Insert coin to play

As an industry that was sized at \$164.6bn globally last year (global SVOD revenues were \$99bn), and is expected to grow to \$192bn by 2027, the biggest game creators have no desperate need to chase TV money or put out a rushed tie-in.

Szybor at CD Projekt Red says that the Warsaw-based firm is more interested in “creating something that matters” with the right partner, rather than just “making an adaptation for the sake of adapting the game,” but adds that the “dream is to tell them in all mediums that would be kindly open to our storytelling.”

Meanwhile, Brian Wright, a Netflix original series alum who now serves as chief content officer at LA-based Riot Games Entertainment, tells TBI that his company plans to develop “anything we do in entertainment” in-house.

Serving as the film, TV and animation division of Riot Games, the unit worked with French animation studio Fortiche to develop Netflix’s *Arcane*, an animated fantasy adventure series based upon its *League Of Legends* game franchise. Riot has invested in Fortiche to help scale the business, with Wright describing *Arcane* as “an organic evolution of our creative partnership.”

Wright says this strategy is “to ensure excellence and



control our own destiny,” but adds that the company “will be looking for a strategic distribution partner at some point down the line”. He notes that fans of Riot’s games are clamoring for long-form narrative spin-offs, such as *Arcane*, which is currently “deep into the animation phase with Fortiche” on its second season in production for Netflix.

HBO’s *The Last Of Us* was co-created by Craig Mazin in partnership with Neil Druckmann, who also co-created the game series. While some have pointed to the close involvement of the original game creator as one of the reasons for its success, opinions here are decidedly mixed.

Bloys tells TBI that having Druckmann on board was “a very big point” but says that “there is nothing particular about video games that make them better or worse to develop” and reiterates he was drawn to the project due to having had “a very good experience” with Mazin on his drama *Chernobyl*.

Ubisoft’s Juguet, meanwhile, says original creators should not necessarily serve as a showrunner or writer “because those are two very different types of expertise.” She does suggest, however, that it is “absolutely necessary for the show’s creative team to deep dive into the world of the game they are adapting” so that they can understand what the creator was looking to achieve and connect with “what makes the fans tick.”

## Expansion pack

It will come as little surprise that when a TV show based on a game does well, it drives interest and revenue back towards those original games.

According to data from TBI’s research sibling Omdia, the success of *The Last Of Us* series led to a 238% increase in UK sales week-on-week for *The Last Of Us, Part 1* game, while the PS4 version of *The Last Of Us: Remastered* also saw a 322% sales spike.

Sztybor, meanwhile tells TBI that *Cyberpunk: Edgerunners* created “a lot of new fans that saw Night City (the setting of *Cyberpunk 2077* and its anime spin-off) for the first time and fell in love with it,” bringing new players to the game, as well as returning those that “wanted to go back and feel the vibe once again.”

But while the conversation around the TV and gaming industry crossover has largely been framed around how adaptations of existing IP can drive fans from shows to games and vice-versa, there are other possibilities for profitable co-operation between the two sectors.

Ubisoft developed and co-produces Apple TV+ workplace comedy *Mythic Quest*, which is set in a video game studio, and concluded its third season in



*Cyberpunk: Edgerunners* (top) and content added to *Cyberpunk 2077* that was inspired by the anime series

January – with a fourth on the way.

Producing alongside Lionsgate Television, 3 Arts Entertainment and RCG Productions, the company provides art assets for the show, visuals for the fictional titular video game and has assisted the writers with authentically depicting the workspace and culture.

Boykin says that *Mythic Quest* is “a really great example of how our film and television business doesn’t need to rely solely on adapting our games.

“We can also bring our player community film and television projects that are connected to gaming and that treat the representation of that industry and community with authenticity, comedy and heart.”

Other collaborations include a reversal of direction, as Netflix’s partnership with Ubisoft covers more than games becoming shows. The game studio has teamed up with the streamer’s external games division, and an exclusive *Assassin’s Creed* mobile game is among the projects being launched by Netflix.

One thing is clear: as streamers move into gaming and game studios invest in TV production units to expand onto the screen, the union between these two forms of entertainment has never been stronger. **TBI**



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## Keeping on

*The Man Who Died* and *Cold Courage* screenwriter Brendan Foley tracks the emerging global trend in scripted TV shows that portray the battles of ordinary working people in the post-pandemic economy

**T**hey say the world's oldest profession is selling sex. But there is another less reputable one that would give it a run for its money – storytelling. Dating back some 200,000 years, some believe that cave paintings represent the world's first 'storyboards,' drawn to accompany a long-lost verbal narrative.

Sadly, prehistory does not record if the first cave pitch for *When Tharg Got Stomped By A Woolly Mammoth* sold in the room, nor whether it was regarded as a comedy or a drama.

Storytelling, whether conjuring images from the flames of a neolithic campfire or streaming on a lonesome laptop, clearly fulfills a primal human need. Stories help us make sense of a world several sizes too big for us through indirectly shared experiences, particularly in hard times.

If history is a guide, audiences look for two opposite things in downturns – escapism, and what I'll call 'ingenious realism.' In the Great Depression and the Hungry '30s, many of our more recent ancestors, burdened by financial and political insecurities, flocked





*The Bear* on Hulu sees a talented chef return home to his family's more down-to-earth sandwich restaurant

to movie theatres. The 'Picture Palaces' were regarded as wonders of comfort and affordable luxury – art deco elegance for the masses.

The audiences escaped their tough lives to see 'white telephone' movies, in which dazzling damsels in elegant gowns arranged glittering dinner dates with dapper cads on sleek white telephones, a world away from what awaited the general audience at work or home. My Belfast granny was a dressmaker and was famous for being able to recreate the dresses of the starlets cheaply for her offspring before the following Saturday's showing.

We do not have to look far on today's reality TV for the modern equivalent of the white telephone. A glance at some of the most popular shows on the UK's ITV for example would include *Real Housewives*, *The Only Way Is Essex*, *Love Island* – all ultra-successful sexy, escapist fare. But what of the other side of the equation – the ingenious realism in drama?

### Superpower smarts

Just as all those white telephones and implausibly long cigarette holders prompted a backlash in the form of French New Wave, modern audiences cannot survive on eye candy and escapism alone. In the TV drama world, some of the recent break-out hits have focused on how ordinary working people somehow manage to look after themselves and their families, while the world tries to wash them down the plug-hole in a vortex of debt and contempt.

They do so by adapting and surviving, in short, by ingenuity. Unlike the heroes of Marvel, they do not have unusual superpowers to help them survive. Their superpower is being smart, despite – or maybe because of – their precarious finances.

One of the first harbingers of this latest wave of 'ingenious realism' was *Squid Game*. While its original marketing seemed to herald something like *Hunger Games* meets *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?*, the vast Netflix audience stayed because they saw resourceful if desperate humans refusing to screw each other over for the amusement of their economic overlords.

The protagonists signed up to the games to get out of crushing, insurmountable debt. In some cases, they sought to save their parents or children from economic or social ruin in a world that knows the price of everything but the value of nothing. The antagonists tormenting *Squid Game*'s unfortunate heroes are a handful of globalist ultra-rich shit-heels who use their wealth to pull the wings off flies rather than improve their planet. Any resemblance to real life is purely coincidental.

In some cases the response to blatant economic

injustice is raw and visceral, such as 2023's *Dirty Linen*, a series from the Philippines, distributed by ABS-CBN Entertainment. It revels in its status as a sort of Revenger's Tragedy, with an orphan girl trying to find out what happened her mother, a maid for a hyper-connected wealthy family which has effortlessly swept her murder under the expensive carpet as a minor inconvenience. The daughter infiltrates the wealthy family as a maid, determined to bring them down, crossing some moral boundaries to do so.

Earlier successes, such as both the UK and US iterations of Paul Abbott's *Shameless* or Korea's Oscar-winning *Parasite* concentrated on more of an underclass than a working class. The lowest rung of the working-class ladder has always merged with that underclass, dropping off the bottom rung into oblivion or crime.

It's a choice that would be familiar to the young gang of self-made family in Hulu's FX hit *Reservation Dogs*, filmed almost entirely in Oklahoma with brilliant young Native American talent. Their world offers them little scope for economic survival or career progression, yet they constantly come up with side-gigs and hustles to fund their dream of moving from their dead-end reservation to a largely-imaginary California.

The new wave of ingenious proletarians in many of these shows tend to try to make ends meet, at first at least, by legit – or only slightly dodgy – means. In Christopher Storer's *The Bear*, on Hulu, a talented aspiring chef has escaped the humble roots of his family's working class southside Chicago sandwich restaurant for the glittering heights of New York's Michelin-starred eateries.

There, he learns from colossally entitled and mean-spirited pricks what it takes to be a great chef. When his brother commits suicide back home, he is forced to return to his roots, both to save the bankrupt but much-loved sandwich shop, and to come to terms with his place in his own fractured family. His early attempts to impose his new-found culinary rigor are met by a rebellion from his family and customers, until both sides realise they have something useful to offer and something new to learn.

A similar restaurant kitchen hot-house is the crucible for British 'one-shot' feature *Boiling Point*, starring England's one stop shop for grass roots brilliance, Stephen Graham. Graham has repeatedly brought 'ordinary' working men to extra-ordinary life onscreen, never more-so than this chef's meltdown in real time.

Graham previously observed: "If I can find socially aware things that are saying something – well, that's where I'm from. It's what I know. So it's where I've tried to keep my base." The BBC is working on a series to pick up six months on from where the feature left off.

## Blurred lines

Despite all the grit, one of the most fascinating aspects of this new wave of ingenious realism is its refusal to be pigeon-holed as comedy or drama. Previous generations of kitchen sink drama, like the wonderful *Angry Young Men* of the British 1960s wave, or the books of John Steinbeck a generation earlier, tended to wear their drama outrage on their sleeve, or their comedy up-front like Tom Courtenay in *Billy Liar*.

But our current wave, perhaps more in the tradition of Alan Bleasdale's 1980s *Boys From The Blackstuff*, is quite happy hopping from black comedy to drama and back in the space of three minutes.

One such current comedy-drama hybrid, is the remarkably fresh *Mo* on Netflix, starring edgy yet ridiculously likeable stand-up talent Mo Amer.

The lead character in *Mo*, a first generation Palestinian American, tries to look after his mother who pines for her home country and dead spouse as she cleaves to the old ways, while her goodhearted but gobby son has integrated utterly into the struggling, vibrant working class of present-day Houston.

Mo also tries to engage with his Latina auto mechanic girlfriend, as both aim to make ends meet through legitimate work. Mo is repeatedly stymied by his illegal immigrant status. He resorts to a wide range of ingenious schemes, gigs and side-hustles, that bring him to the borderlands of criminality as well as the borderlands of the United States.

The family dynamic motivating his drive to survive is shown through his most successful gig – trying to create and market his mother's almost mystically-tasty Palestinian olive oil on a grand scale in Texas. The venture brings him in touch with redneck shit-kicker olive ranchers, Mexican olive-rustlers and disgruntled gangsters on both sides of the border.

**“These working-stiff protagonists are focused on a world where economic survival is a daily reality and the income clock is set to zero every morning, just as surely as it is during *Squid Game*”**

Brendan Foley



*Reservation Dogs* follows a group of Indigenous North American teenagers who are trying to make ends meet



Unlike their wealthier hand-wringing counterparts in series that deal with more genteel types, the inhabitants of these new series have a more robust and honest attitude to race relations. Mo's language is urban bro-speak, recognisable by the inhabitants of a hundred US cities, not the property of any one ethnicity.

This is not the wishful thinking world of a multi-ethnic Benetton advert or sociology lecture, but the rough reality that most working people have better things to do than just think purely in terms of race or sexuality – their own tribes and families often cross racial boundaries and their friendships are based on childhood street alliances, defending their diverse school-friend homies, family, or crew, and sharing their fierce attempts to survive and thrive.

This new generation of working-class characters are often rooted in, and proud of, their own ethnicities, but like Mo, they are able to laugh at themselves and tease their friends about rival tribes. Why? Because they are defined and united by their shared economic struggle to stay afloat. These characters are not un-enlightened, but few of them are overly-worried about rarefied angst, micro-aggressions or issues that vex the well-heeled chattering classes.

These working-stiff protagonists are focused on a world where economic survival is a daily reality and the income clock is set to zero every morning, just as surely as it is during *Squid Game*. In other words, reality as opposed to reality TV.

Another great comedy-drama on the struggle to not just make ends meet, but also to be respected along the way, is Craig Robinson's security guard hero of *Killing It*, on Peacock. He is almost a poster-child for the American Dream, an African-American office security guard fizzing with ideas and optimism on how to make something of himself.

Yet when he dons his best suit to bring his energy and plans to the bosses at his own workplace for a small business loan, he is met with patronising rejection. He decides to go another way, where his ingenuity will be a plus and not a handicap – as a bounty hunter for giant escaped snakes, with a demented Australian Uber-driver accomplice.

## Elementary experiences

More mainstream humour is brought to bear in Quinta Brunson's much-awarded *Abbott Elementary* on ABC. At first the stressed staff and structures of Philadelphia's crumbling public education system might not seem fertile fodder for comedy, but the passion and quirks of the teachers have made the series a hit with both critics and audiences, who see some of the own experiences reflected and a sense that if we didn't laugh we would cry.

Nowhere is the battle to make ends meet and the need for ingenuity to provide for a family sharper than in Molly Smith Metzler's *Maid*, for Netflix. It is a breathtakingly fresh look at the struggles of a young single mother fleeing a toxic yet nuanced relationship, trying to keep her minimum-wage cleaning gig as the only way to keep custody of her young daughter.

Society conspires at every turn to stop her – if she cannot afford to run her car she will lose her gig and if she loses her gig or misses a check-in with a social worker, her precarious existence will crumble and she will lose her child. Yet at every turn she overcomes micro-disasters with courage and cleverness, not in some Pollyanna version of an imaginary plucky young woman, but because she knows her child is at stake and ingenuity born of desperation is the only survival option. She is the poster-girl for not letting the bastards grind you down.

A similar dynamic is at work in the hyper-successful *The Cleaning Lady* on Fox, long championed by EP Rose Marie Vega, in which an illegal immigrant former doctor, trying to get bone marrow treatment for her son, scratches a living as a cleaning lady until she witnesses a murder and is recruited by criminals to tidy up their crime scenes as a handy alternative to being killed.

Young adults are the focus for the new BBC-Netflix series *Red Rose*, named in Time magazine as one of the freshest shows of 2023. From the producers of *Sex Education*, while it has its fair share of supernatural jump scares and audience-appropriate hand-brake plot turns, what makes it special is its honest willingness to face the social and economic challenges of a bunch of working class school-leavers sharing 2023's version of teenage online angst and the challenges of scraping together enough money to enjoy their summer while looking after younger siblings or helping keep their families fed and sane. 'Money is no object', said no one in this world ever. Time described *Red Rose* as "managing to make some keen observations about young people, social media, and surveillance without getting pedantic. It's also a relief to see a teen drama grounded in regular kids with real problems like poverty and addiction, rather than the twee or overly glossy aesthetics that dominate the genre."

These same links of economic survival, ingenuity, caring for family, with the underworld never being far away, unite many of these series and have clearly struck a chord with audiences worldwide. We are starting to glimpse lives around the world that often share a sense of working class perspectives and values, albeit in utterly different places and backgrounds, yet always with a fierce love of family and street smarts directed at surviving and thriving rather than curling up and dying.

It was perhaps inevitable that our collective emergence from a pandemic and the arrival of a global economic slump would be reflected in our screen drama. The

Covid experience, though shared, fell harder on ordinary working people than any other section of society.

And it is undeniable that just as there was a howling need for diversity in the subjects and writers of new drama over the last decade, there were those quite happy to reflect a wide diversity in ethnicity or sexuality while equally happy to ignore shamefully low representation of working-class subjects or writers.

As one wit put it: "For some people, diversity seems to mean whether they went to Oxford or Cambridge".

Similar challenges and demand for both working class stories and storytellers exist worldwide, including the USA



where most of the examples in this article originate. In the US, the subject is complicated by a different perception of what it means to be working class versus middle class.

These days, perhaps the best definition is that working class means anyone who is one pay packet ahead of disaster, which means a lot of people, and more by the month – not so much blue collar or white collar, but frayed collar.

This is most emphatically not a call for anyone fortunate enough to be from a privileged background to feel guilty rather than lucky, or worse still start brushing up on their Dick Van Dyke cockney accent.

The current trend for subdividing people into ever-smaller put-upon and competing sub-groups in some stock exchange of victimhood ends up with each of us in a minority of one. It is a rather sterile response to a real problem. A better one is for all of us, individuals, companies and screen bodies, to take any small real step we can to become more genuinely inclusive and expansive, like the stories waiting to be told.

They are stories of the 'extraordinary ordinary', told by writers who resonate with the working-life experiences of tens of millions of viewers. Such shows are more gripping, more real than any 'white telephone', even if it happens to be a next generation iPhone. It was still made somewhere, by another worker. **TBI**

*Mo on Netflix* explores the illegal immigrant experience in working-class Houston



## Forward facing

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French drama is evolving rapidly, as subject matter and new business models perk the attention of international buyers. Marie-Agnès Bruneau talks to the key figures behind three recent projects to find out about this latest evolution

**F**rench drama is diversifying and new genres, topics and artistic styles are opening up the scope of interested international buyers.

Deals are changing and prices – for some projects – are rising, according to the French distributors which had shows selected at Unifrance Rendez-vous in Paris earlier this year.

The event underlined the increasing collaboration between those in the worlds of TV and film, with assembled talents working across both mediums, as scripted offers increasing creative possibilities.

### Silver screen touch

“I actually wrote my first TV series in the late 1970s and experienced the joy of being able to tell longer stories,” recalls veteran film writer and director Danièle Thompson, who more recently penned and directed – together with her son, Christopher – the Brigitte Bardot miniseries for France Télévisions.

“I was some kind of pioneer, because working for TV at the time was very much looked down upon by movie people,” she says. Since then, series have experienced a revolution, first in the US “well before France,” she adds. “Now, it is possible to get the greatest talents.”

For Christopher, *Bardot* was his first taste of TV series having previously worked in theatrical films, but it won't be his last. “I'm now developing a new series project,” he says, with the adaptation of French best-selling novel *Fortune De France* in the works with France 2.

*Bardot* also underlines how the industry is shifting, according to producer Pascal Breton, who had the idea for the show well before he set up Federation Entertainment. It was, he says, “perhaps my oldest project. Each year that I was casting talents for [20-year-old daytime series] *St Tropez*, I was also looking for Bardot without ever finding her,” he recalls.

While Breton's Bardot did not show up, the project would not have been an easy sell at the time, either. “What's changed is that broadcasters are on the hunt for major projects. Aside from Canal+, that was not really the case, even three years ago,” Breton tells TBI.

“And Brigitte Bardot is not someone easy, so [commissioners] were a bit afraid of her. She also had the image of a sex symbol that did not fit with the idea of a modern woman. They did not see her the way I was seeing her, the way Danièle Thompson saw her too – the first major, popular, female heroine, who claimed the right of abortion, to dress as she wanted and to sleep with whom she wanted, with her trademark lack of shoes and hair up.”

*Astrid Et Raphaëlle* has been picked up by AXN Mystery in Japan and Walter Presents across the US, the UK and the Nordics

It is something of a tradition for Thompsons to work with other family members, with Danièle having started out with her father, the late French comedy director Gerard Oury, with whom she collaborated on many films.

And being part of a cinema family, Danièle did meet with Bardot “but we don't really know each other,” she says. Instead, the project “was like an investigation,” explains Christopher, using “tonnes of press articles and books,” as well as news archives to recreate the feel of the 1950s.

While the creative team went about building the show, Federation looked to leverage the increasing demand for drama to its advantage.

Rather than selling all rights to a streamer, Federation took the longer road of an international co-production. “It was important for us to keep the rights, because in 30 years time, a series like this will continue to sell,” Breton explains.

The result was a multifaceted deal: France 2 took the first French window; Netflix had the second window and took selected European country rights; and Mediaset in Italy joined as an early partner.

With a cinematographic touch, and perhaps as well because Bardot remains a brand of her own, the series is selling at a higher price, Breton says. “Poland offered us three times the price they would usually give to a French series,” he says.

### Authentic entertainment

While the Thompsons researched *Bardot* to ensure its authenticity, a similar feel was being sought by artistic director Alexandre de Seguins, who is behind French procedural series *Astrid Et Raphaëlle*, which was co-created with Laurent Burtin.

Known as *Bright Minds* in English, the series features two female cops, one of whom is autistic, and has become a key hit for France 2, with ratings increasing season after season, reaching five million viewers for the latest third run.

“The idea of looking into autism originally came from Sherlock Holmes and the fact that Arthur Conan Doyle got inspiration from an autistic doctor – I'm a big fan,” Seguins explains.

“The character of Holmes has become an archetype, a brilliant guy who is not that comfortable socially. We read a lot about autism as we felt we needed some legitimacy on the subject, but then it became a bottomless source of inspiration.

“Our character sees the world differently and thanks to that, she finds solutions. But then, that being said, it's absolutely not a realistic series. It's a pure criminal tale, it's entertainment,” he adds.



As with *Bardot*, the sales model for *Astrid Et Raphaëlle* reflects changing habits. While buyers usually wait for more episodes on procedural series, this one started selling abroad quite quickly, reports France TV Distribution's SVP of international sales, Julia Schulte.

It was picked up across Europe, with Walter Presents taking rights for the UK, the US, Australia and the Nordic countries. "The series was also an instant success in Japan on AXN Mystery channel, with NHK as a result buying it for its 22.00 strand, which is very unusual for a French series," she says.

"It is light crime, so very accessible, and there is a demand internationally for diversity, which the series addresses without being too clichéd," she adds. Several options for remakes have also been taken, although details remain under wraps.

## New generation

*Astrid Et Raphaëlle* also reflects new voices emerging across the French drama landscape. The show is the first that Seguin has created, having started out directing docs before moving to scripted development.

"I was attracted to scripted and realised what I really wanted to do was to tell stories. So I asked myself, would I prefer to write something and not direct it, or do I absolutely want to be a director? The answer was obvious and that proved a good choice because on a series, there are normally several directors.

"Then I had the chance to meet the right producer, in Jean-Sébastien Bouilloux – we got along very well, developed and redeveloped together and it's really thanks to this good relationship that the project took off.

"There is more freedom today and a better understanding of the scripts, of their issues, their qualities – producers dare to go for more quality."

Virginie Boireaux of Hago (Have A Good One) also believes there is a new generation of talented producers emerging. "That's the reason why, together with Constantin Briest, we decided to set-up our own company, as we want to work with them," she says.

*I Killed My Husband* (above) deals with issues of domestic violence, while Federation believes *Bardot* (right) has a long distribution shelf life



Hago has enjoyed a good start with another kind of crime series, *I Killed My Husband*. The show was produced for NBCUniversal's thriller and action channel 13ème Rue, which commissions a few shows per year, although it has less budget than the biggest channels.

Hago, which got involved as a co-producer, sold a second window to TF1 Group in France, and to Walter Presents for the UK, US and Canada.

The show itself tackles the issue of domestic violence in a unique way, with Erika Sainte (*Crimson Rivers*) and Antoine Gouy (*Lupin*) starring. "My input was to suggest a genre and entertainment approach, which fit perfectly with the 13ème Rue personality," says director, Rémy 'Silk' Binisti.

"There have been many very realistic series on the subject, but this one is really a genre series – it uses elements from thrillers, horror films and Western narratives," adds Gouy.

"The multiplication of platforms and outlets for scripted is really positive because it enlarges the scope for series," adds Sainte. "In this case, there's less budget than a mainstream series, but there's more artistic freedom than one can only find usually in theatrical feature films.

"It is now possible to be bolder. The series is very audacious in many places, the choice of colours, shots and the use of large focal – the director of photography was brilliant."

"I was attracted by this different approach," Sainte adds. "It's very interesting to be able to play the main character in a series on such a topic, which is more broadly about the abuse of power.

"In the past, I've played many wounded characters – I don't know why, I'm often called to play characters with a heavy past, although I'm rather funny in real life! But with this show it was possible to play it in a more entertaining way."

For Gouy, there is certainly more freedom available at present. "The thing with TV though, as opposed to feature films, is that there are perhaps a few too many decision makers who all want to have their word!" **TBI**

## "TV at the time was very much looked down upon by movie people"

Danièle Thompson



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## Script to Screen: A Body That Works

Mark Layton talks to Shira Hadad, Dror Mishani and Shay Capon, the creators of Israeli surrogacy drama *A Body That Works*, about the inspiration and original plans for the Keshet 12 series

**H**aving already sparked watercooler debate in Israel, Kuma Studios series *A Body That Works* is now bringing its dramatic examination of surrogacy, fertility, family relationships and bodily autonomy to the global market.

The series follows Ellie and Ido (Rotem Sela & Yehuda Levi) a well-to-do Tel Aviv couple struggling to conceive a child who, after multiple unsuccessful pregnancies, hire cash-strapped single mum surrogate Chen (Gal Malka) to carry their baby to term.

It is a decision that ultimately affects the lives of everyone involved in unforeseen ways as they begin to re-evaluate their relationships.

While the show was created by Shira Hadad, Dror Mishani and Shay Capon, who also serves as director, it is Hadad who gets to take credit for originating the story, which is inspired by her own experiences with surrogacy.

“Ten years ago, my son was born through the surrogacy process – it was very unlike the process in this show, but the initial idea came from there. In this process, in this triangle, there is a very strong dramatic potential. I kept thinking about it in the first years of his life and at a certain point I started developing an idea for a feature film,” she tells TBI.

After writing the first draft for a feature, Hadad realised that the scope of the story she wanted to tell was better suited to a series, and it was at this point that Mishani joined the project.

“It started from a very far away place from where it is today. We

worked for four years, we went through all kinds of detours, and almost two years before the series was filmed, we sort of settled on this version that we finally wrote,” she says.

The Keshet International-distributed series made its debut on Keshet 12 in February and has since managed to achieve that rarest of phenomena for an Israeli show: growing its audience share during its first three weeks. It has also sparked national media debate around some of the issues presented in the series.

“Normally, when Israeli shows are succeeding around the world - we talk about *Hostages* or *Fauda* - they succeed because they show another reality that the British, the American or the French viewer doesn't know or knows only through the news,” says Mishani, who believes that *A Body That Works* instead deals with very universal, relatable themes and issues.

“This show is completely different – these discussions, these fights, are the same fights being fought in London, in Paris, in Stockholm, wherever. And I think this will be the attraction of the show, the way that it reflects very basic, universal tensions and desires.”

### Act One: Political pivot

Israeli broadcaster Keshet was involved with the project from a very early stage, but as Hadad reveals, the story went through some big changes on its way to the screen.



“We pitched them another show,” she says, explaining that while still based around surrogacy, the series was to have followed a young Israeli prime minister and his wife.

“That was the show we pitched them and they loved it. We worked on it for a year and a half – but we failed completely with it,” says Hadad.

The writers instead dropped the political angle and moved the action to follow a married couple in Tel Aviv, with Keshet agreeing to the reworked proposal. “It was very lucky for us. They said OK, try writing it like this and let’s see how it goes,” says Hadad.

“I think that the original looks much better on paper, but I’m sure that this one is much better in fact, because there was something not real about that [original version]. We kept writing political lines and all kinds of things that we were not interested in and we didn’t understand.”

Mishani adds: “When Keshet read the real scripts, the scripts that were filmed afterwards, they understood that what was important about this show was not the politics or the scenery, what was important was the relationships.”

Kuma Studios came on board after Keshet, when the series was still set to follow the prime minister character. Hadad says that after they “shopped around” for a producer, they “fell in love” with the production firm.

Once the story found its familiar form, Capon then joined the project as director around two years ago. He says he was struck by the emotion at the heart of Hadad and Mishani’s writing.



Chen (Gal Malka, left) agrees to act as a surrogate for married couple Ellie and Ido (Rotem Sela & Yehuda Levi, right), whose lives change in unexpected ways as a result

“In every script I read, there was a question that was hiding in this series, what this series is really about. At first I thought it was about incomplete, damaged people and then I went deeper and deeper, and I understood that this series is really about the never-ending relationship between children and parents, and the longing for unconditional love. Every one of the characters is seeking love and acceptance from the other person,” says Capon.

The characters, particularly Ellie, evolved during the writing process with Hadad revealing that “we went through about 20 other professions before we made her into a book editor.”

Hadad explains that while the job didn’t seem very interesting for a TV series, she and Mishani realised that “editing a book is very much like being a surrogate. These two processes echo each other – bringing something into the world, through a third person, they go side by side.”

## Act Two: Casting coup

Hadad describes the series as “an intimate show” and notes that, unlike some of the more well-travelled Israeli dramas of recent years, “nobody shoots anyone, nobody’s kidnapped, there are no explosions.”

So the creators see it as something of a coup in that the project managed to attach “the three biggest stars in Israel” – *The Baker And The Beauty*’s Rotem Sela, *Mossad 101*’s Yehuda Levi and *Fauda*’s Lior Raz.

“It’s crazy that they all came together in one show. Gal Malka (*Commandments*), who plays Chen, is less well known but she shines,” says Hadad.

Raz, who is known internationally as the lead star of action-drama series *Fauda*, plays the role of Tomer, a well-known horror movie actor who turned to writing and whose book Ellie is editing.

The character was based in-part upon the real-life star, reveals Hadad: “He was sort of an inspiration, but I didn’t think he would actually play the role – then, as it turned out, he actually agreed to do it.”



Capon directed Raz to play against type: “Lior normally acts the role of the warrior, so it gave me the chance to make him a very delicate and very frightened character, it made it very interesting.”

The series has already achieved high ratings in Israel, with audience share growing week to week to 26.5% by episode three, hitting the same peak again at episode six, and maintaining high share throughout the run, when the norm for Israeli TV is for 10-20% of drama audiences to drop off after episode one.

As the show goes in front of buyers, the creators are hoping that international audiences may find themselves similarly hooked. **TBI**

**Top  
Pick**



# Scripted Hot Picks

From crime drama to quirky supernatural comedy, TBI takes a look at some of the top scripted series heading to market

## Better

**Producer:** Sister

**Distributor:** All3Media International

**Broadcaster:** BBC One (UK)

**Logline:** A corrupt cop embarks on a cat-and-mouse game of deception with a crime boss after she has a change of heart about her past misdeeds and sets out to right her wrongs

**T**his crime drama follows corrupt policewoman Lou Slack (Leila Farzad), who has worked for crime boss Col McHugh (Andrew Buchan) for decades.

Called on to help cover up a murder one night, a family emergency leads Slack to question her past misdeeds.

“This is the closest she’s got to seeing the effects of her corruption first-hand and when she learns that her son was seriously ill on that night, she takes a look at herself and decides she wants out of the corruption,” reveals David Swetman, SVP of content and commercial strategy for All3Media International.

Realising that the road to redemption is by bringing down McHugh, Slack begins a cat-and-mouse game with the criminal.

“One of the key tensions in the series is between Col and Lou as he tries to work out whether he can trust her and where he tries to work out if she is turning good and might deceive him,” Swetman tells TBI, describing Slack’s journey as “compelling, captivating and at times very emotional.”

He adds: “The stakes couldn’t be higher as one wrong move could see her reputation, life and family destroyed either by the police

or Col. Her son’s illness shows her what she cares about most and as she becomes closer with her family than ever has before, the increasing possibility of losing this creates further tension. Leila Farzad’s performance as Lou is incredibly strong and even in her darkest moral moments the audience roots for her throughout.”

Swetman believes that *Better* will appeal to international audiences because it is “a unique, thrilling, character driven crime series, with a compelling and complex redemption arc running through it.”

The series is produced by award-winning production company Sister, known globally for series such as *Chernobyl* and *This is Going to Hurt* and written by Sam Vincent and Jonathan Brackley, known for writing and creating *Humans* and directed by Jonathan Brough.

“The strong talent behind the show have created something fresh and exciting within the crime genre that will appeal to a broad range of audiences around the globe. There are also great, tense and emotional performances from the lead cast Leila Farzad and Andrew Buchan and the Leeds setting is an extremely atmospheric and fresh setting for a crime drama,” says Swetman.



### I Am Scrooge

**Producer:** Zeitsprung Pictures

**Distributor:** Beta Film

**Broadcaster:** RTL+ (Europe)

**Logline:** Fact-based crime drama following the pursuit of infamous extortionist Arno Funke – aka Scrooge

Set in the 1980s and 1990s and based on real events, this 6 x 60-minute crime drama tells the true story of Arno Funke, better

known to the world as Scrooge, the department store extortionist. Becoming an international media sensation and dubbed the

‘DuckTales Bandit’ by The New Yorker, Funke (played here by Friedrich Mücke) built bombs and set them off in high-end department stores during the night as leverage for extortion.

But what is most striking was Funke’s inventiveness. “He builds remote-controlled money delivery devices, rail vehicles, mini-submarines and dummies.

His money transfers are reminiscent of film dramas that play out like comedies,” explains Dominik Frankowski, producer at Zeitsprung Pictures.

“It is the longest and most elaborate extortion case in German criminal history. At the beginning of the 1990s, a so far unprecedented media hype arises around Scrooge. In surveys, the majority of Germans take his side. A pop song is written about him. People walk around in ‘I Am Scrooge’ T-shirts. A story that was just waiting to be told in an exciting high-end mini-series.”

After he escapes with a huge sum, detectives are hot on Funke’s heels, but he soon learns that money can’t buy happiness.

Julia Herb, VP of sales & acquisitions at Beta Film, says that the series is a “universal story of small against big” and suggests that the appeal for international audiences will be because it is “something they have never seen before. If it hadn’t happened like this, no one would believe it.”

### Rebooting

**Producer:** Nippon TV

**Distributor:** Nippon TV

**Broadcaster:** Nippon TV (Japan)

**Logline:** A woman gets the chance to relive her life over and over again after refusing to reincarnate in this supernatural comedy series

This quirky Japanese comedy follows a woman who gets the chance to revisit her banal life when she suddenly gets hit by a car and dies.

As she awakens into the afterlife, she finds herself in an empty white room where a clerk files her death. There are then two doors: one leads to her next life as a giant anteater, while another allows her to re-enter her previous, boring life.

She chooses to take control of her karma and reincarnation,

and her second go at life begins; however, things do not go as planned and when she dies again, she faces the decision once more.

“At first, she is desperate to be rebooted as a human being, instead of a giant anteater or a mackerel or a sea urchin, and she tries her best to become a better version of herself compared to her past life,” reveals Yuki Akehi, director of international business development at Nippon TV.

“However, as she is said “to be prone to die in her 30’s”,



when she dies again and again, repeating her same life over and over again, she realises that she should take advantage of the knowledge she remembers from her past lives and use it not only for herself but for the dear people

surrounding her.” Akehi says that the series tells “a positive and heartwarming story” that “gives viewers the chance to reflect on the lingering question: what would you do if you had the chance to restart your life?” **TBI**

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## Time to reset

Docuseries have exploded over recent years but rampant competition, rising costs and squeezed budgets are now impacting producers, writes Nick Edwards

**S**treaming has redefined docuseries, allowing them to be consumed in hundreds of millions of homes around the world, but what does the future hold now the sector is undergoing cuts, consolidation and contraction?

The roots of docuseries go deeper than the current streaming era, of course. For many, they lead to the 1990s and former president of documentary films at HBO, Sheila Nevins. She decided that unlike much of the documentary output at the time – considered to be informative and cause-driven but somewhat dry – HBO docs should veer towards ‘docutainment’. They would have a particular emphasis on exploring life from the perspective of those at the margins of society; substance abusers, cult victims, mass murderers, con artists, and so on.

One of her significant early commissions was *Paradise Lost* (1996), in which three teenagers are falsely accused of murdering three eight-year-olds after performing satanic sexual rituals on them. As

public interest and evidence of a mistrial grew, she commissioned two further features that followed the characters into middle age. The trilogy was an early evolutionary step in docuseries, with the slow burn narrative structure extended again (to 10 episodes) with Jean-Xavier de Lestrade’s *The Staircase*, which aired on France’s Canal+ in 2004.

The foundations of docuseries were built in cable, but unlike scripted, the medium came of age during the streaming era. HBO’s 2015 commission of *The Jinx* made it a pivotal year. “We had the original idea when streaming was very young,” says Marc Smerling, creator of the series about Bob Durst, the son of a real estate mogul suspected of killing his wife (and others).

“We had a hard time getting all the story into one film, even at two and a half hours. It was also a little boring. When we cut it down, it was just a procedural,” he continues. “We went to lunch with the editor and we were talking about *House Of Cards*, and I said, ‘Now, if we could do that we could have

*The Vow* and *The Lincoln Project* (above) were both from *The Others*, while *Don’t F\*\*K With Cats: Hunting An Internet Killer* (opposite) was produced by Raw TV



our cake and eat it. If we could just stretch the story out, we could have all the plot points behind all the murders that took place over so many years, but we could also keep all the quirky detail as well as all the emotional storytelling.”

*The Jinx* coalesced many of the medium’s previous developments whilst also incorporating high-end recreations. “We spent our time figuring out how to tell the story visually, rather than just re-enacting multiple murder scenes,” says Smerling, who was behind feature docs such as *Capturing The Freidmans* and *Catfish*. And in the same year as *The Jinx* came the 10-episode *Making A Murderer* from Netflix, which took over 10 years to film. Together with books, podcasts and films, these two docuseries solidified ‘true crime’ as a genre in the public consciousness.

## Tech & awe

As streaming evolved, tech became a distinguishing narrative feature in many of the most iconic docuseries.

“The abundance of digital artefacts accrued in even the most mundane moments of our lives reflects how important our digital lives have become to our sense of self,” says Dimitri Doganis, founder of Raw TV, the company behind *Don’t F\*\*K With Cats: Hunting An Internet Killer* (2019) and *The Tinder Swindler* (2022).

Tech has been driving docuseries in manifold ways,

he says. “Podcasts like *Serial* proved that with the right distribution system there was an audience of scale for deep dives into what would previously have been considered very niche subject areas.

“This made filmmakers, commissioners and financiers sit up and take notice. At the same time, feature documentaries started to go from a more niche to a more mainstream position.”

Features that sparked this popularity includes *Man On Wire* (2008), *The Imposter* (2012) and *Three Identical Strangers* (2018), the latter two both from Raw. “Because these things sit on streamers, audiences are enabled to get excited about them, find them and share them, way beyond what was previously possible – so, spreading word of mouth globally.”

“The ability to design and shape content is something that OTT’s have gotten stronger at,” adds Samira Kanwar of Vice Studios India, whose latest series for Amazon, *Cinema, Marte Dum Tak! (Cinema Till I Die)*, was rolled out globally. “It’s a constant experimentation and re-examining of data and numbers to land on what audiences want,” she says.

“Streamers also bring budgets that enable and facilitate much higher levels of ambition in terms of production values, research and development time,” says Doganis. “If you’d have tried to make *The Tinder Swindler* for a traditional outlet, such as BBC Two or Channel 4, you’d have had a fraction of the budget.”

Importantly, budgets of even the most opulent docuseries are still dwarfed by those of scripted. Netflix’s *Tiger King* also marked a moment of frenzy, with subscriber growth during the pandemic leading to a dash for growth, as streamers expanded orders.

But as with every industry, when a boom occurs, many move in. “The boom in premium brought in a lot of Hollywood companies who set up documentary divisions,” says Roy Ackerman, head of documentary films at The Others, which made HBO’s *The Vow* and Showtime’s *The Lincoln Project*.

“Those companies hire documentary makers but they don’t always understand the challenge of a documentary,” he says. “A documentary is ‘slow cooked’, a lot of the best feature documentaries you see on screen today have a gestation period of years.” *The Vow*’s exploration of the NXIVM cult and its leader Keith Raniere spanned 15 episodes and two seasons.

Like *The Vow*, many of HBO’s best docs of recent years remain true to Nevins’ original vision; *Life Of Crime* (2021) follows a group of New Jersey heroin addicts over three decades; *The Inventor: Out For Blood In Silicon Valley* (2019) chronicles the rise and fall of a ‘miracle’ cancer cure purveyor; and *I’ll Be Gone In The Dark* tackles an author’s all-consuming investigation into the Golden State Killer.

**“There’s greater competition for stories and an influx of middle-men snapping up peoples’ life rights, or rights to articles, or video footage and then trying to sell those on at profit”**

Dimitri Doganis,  
Raw TV





Juan Carlos: *Downfall Of The King* for Sky Deutschland is the latest docuseries from Gebrüder Beetz Filmproduktion

**“It could be a really interesting idea but if it’s not compelling or entertaining, it’s not going to go right now – we’re focusing on ideas that have a chance in very choppy seas. I call it the ‘great reset’”**

Roy Ackerman,  
The Othrs



### Soaring expectations & costs

As the amount of content grew, quality rose as did audience expectations. “The cost of narrative docuseries has exploded over recent years,” says Christian Beetz, CEO of Gebrüder Beetz Filmproduktion, which made Netflix’s first German original docuseries, *A Perfect Crime*. “The audience expects something they have never seen before,” he says, adding that requirements such as 4K with Dolby Sound and HDR quality also add expense.

“There’s greater competition for some of the basic building blocks, most critically good people,” continues Doganis. “But there’s also greater competition for stories. What you’ve seen is an influx of middle-men snapping up peoples’ life rights, or rights to articles, or video footage and then trying to sell those on at profit.”

When rival cable channels and streamers were establishing themselves, the focus was on making their brands destinations for high-quality content. “Now, the focus is less on pure reputational projects. Like any content platform, they want to make sure they have a lot of eyeballs on their content,” says Ackerman.

A more industrialised model has emerged. “There can be very rigid parameters,” says Smerling, who outlines how per episode costs and showrunner allowances have squeezed autonomy. This is not the model that has underpinned docuseries success. When Smerling wants complete creative freedom, he now also turns to podcasts with projects such as *Crimetown*.

“If you want to tell a story with a complex character you need to shoot a lot. You need to follow storylines as they are unfolding, and you might end up with an end that you can’t use, or you might end up with no ‘end’ at all,” says Beetz. Gebrüder Beetz’s next project is *Juan Carlos: Downfall Of The King* for Sky Deutschland due to debut at Canneseries in April.

### ‘The great reset’

There is also a perception that many commissioners’ overriding concerns lie around delivering on time and making productions as salacious as possible. There is also an eye on exploiting IP further, such as producing a scripted version and a companion documentary.

“I think entertainment does get prioritised. We need to be entertained and use content as an escape. So, I don’t begrudge that at all,” says Vice’s Kanwar, whose *Indian Predator* was picked up by Netflix globally. “However, we do need to make more room for the untold, important stories – which may not be a form of escapism but serve other purposes of empathy and an understanding of the human condition.”

This can be what separates the best and worst of the driving genre of docu-series, true crime.

“You’ve got to lift it above the crime itself and the characters involved such as the intrepid cop and the murderer,” says Smerling. “You’re looking for the undercurrents. The chase of the criminal is always compelling but if you want to transcend that element, you have to connect with your audience at another level.” *The Jinx*, he says, “is about how the rich get away with murder.” Last year’s *Mind Over Murder* from HBO, on which Smerling was an executive producer, is about “the fragility of memory,” he says.

And while increased costs are now embedded, along with increased competition, demand is contracting. Many of the outlets that pioneered high-end docuseries and single features, such as CNN, Showtime and HBO, have been most affected by cuts. Amazon, Apple and YouTube are also likely to be assessing how important documentaries are to their overall businesses, as they are not their core offerings.

And while Netflix may stay the course, it is unlikely it will be commissioning enough to compensate for the overall contraction from other buyers. Challenging times are underscored by well-received documentary features not being picked up by streamers at festivals.

“Six or seven of our favourite buyers have left their jobs or their situations have changed,” says Ackerman. “There are things we could have pitched two years ago that might have gone through but won’t now.”

Now, the prevailing attitude amongst commissioners is ‘fewer, bigger, better’ – but how do companies continue to tell the kind of stories that made docuseries great in the first place?

The approach has to be “tougher and better,” says Ackerman. “We’re always looking at 20 or 30 ideas. It could be really interesting but if it’s not compelling or entertaining it’s not going to go right now. We’re focusing on the ones that have a chance in very choppy seas. I call it the ‘great reset’.” **TBI**



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## Short cuts

Shortform factual content is growing fast, but how does it fit into the kaleidoscope of other programming out there? Andy Fry finds out



There's no lack of shortform factual storytelling in the world. With the emergence of social platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Snapchat and TikTok, the last two decades have seen an endless outpouring of user-generated content – covering everything from makeovers and interior design to adrenalin adventure and pets.

The journey for professionally-produced shortform factual content has not been quite so smooth, with Facebook Watch and Snapchat both struggling to land original commissioning models and Quibi proving a short-lived failure.

But these days there is a thriving shortform market that has worked out how to combine commercial and creative learnings from digital first and traditional content creators.

Thom Gulseven is a content producer who was, until Q1 2023, director of creative strategy at LADBible Group (LBG). During his tenure, LBG launched numerous shortform factual series including *Minutes With*, *I Was There* and *Agree To Disagree*.

"This is essentially an AVOD model," explains Gulseven, "predicated on delivering high volumes of efficiently-produced content to the widest possible audience."

It's a highly iterative approach, says Gulseven, and is viable because of the sheer size of LBG's audience – circa 1 billion at time of writing. At this scale, the company has even been able to create locally-targeted content. Earlier this year, for example, it dropped three new series in Australia - *Hindsight*, *Chances* and *My Side*. This followed the earlier success of *Unheard*, a series tackling racial injustice in Australia.

This digital first AVOD-led model has been pivotal to the emergence of a diverse and dynamic shortform factual market. Alongside LBG's slate, for example, BuzzFeed has had hit series like *Unsolved* (true crime) and *Worth It* (lifestyle). Jungle Creations, meanwhile, has just launched

*Engaged*, a female-focused short-form production. The series starts with the premise that the women's toilet "isn't just a place for a wee and topping up your mascara," says Jungle Creations director of video, Charley Sutton. In each episode, two women with unique stories sit in adjacent toilet cubicles. With the wall between them, they cover topics such as dating, grief and body image.

While AVOD is the bread and butter of this model, Gulseven says the growth in the volume of shortform factual could lend itself to potential new revenue streams. "One area that hasn't taken off yet in the digital first space is sponsorship. Another that could open up is ad-funded FAST channels built around original social first content."

In parallel with the AVOD model is brand-funded content, which permeates everything from influencer TikToks to broadcaster-backed series. Speaking at the 2022 Digital Content Forum, C4 senior digital commissioning editor Laura Marks highlighted exemplars such as a series about hidden homelessness, backed by The Body Shop (*Unseen Kingdoms*). More recently, Vinted came in as partner on a C4 YouTube show called *Second Hand Style-Up* while there are plans for a branded collaboration between C4's digital first platform Channel 4.0 and cosmetics brand e.l.f.

Critical to understanding the shortform factual business model is realising that most projects plug into broader content ecosystems. Pinterest, for example, has built up its portfolio of professional quality shortform video through partnerships with publishers.

In March 2023, it unveiled a year-long alliance with leading US publisher Dotdash Meredith (DM) which will bring around 200 original videos to the platform. The partnership kicks off this month with *Colorscapes*, a video series from DM brand Better Homes & Gardens. Soon after comes a series from Brides called *Wedding Dress 360*. This follows a similar tie-up between Pinterest and Conde Nast at

Shortform factual shows such as Future Studios' *Glow Up Your Grades* (opposite) and MTV's *Queerphany* (right) can generate revenue but also help brands find young audiences where they consume content

the end of last year.

Future Studios chief creative officer John Farrar, who previously worked at Raw TV and Talkback Thames, is one of the leading figures in digital first production. He describes his operation as a “flywheel” where the goal is to distribute IP in multiple forms. “Essentially, we’re doing three things. Firstly, we have an in-house team that makes shows for Facebook, Snapchat, and YouTube, then reverts them across platforms and monetises as AVOD.

“Secondly, there is our owned and operated model where we provide shortform video for brands in our portfolio, which covers everything from Marie Claire to Minecraft World. That is also an advertising model. Finally, there is our TV department – where we are looking to both long and shortform commissions.”

For Farrar, the goal is to “make something once, then monetise it in multiple ways. A good example would be our work with Marie Claire. There was an article in a US magazine that inspired us to internally commission *On The Record*, a premium, shortform true crime series. We’re monetising that across various media channels but we’ve also sold both the scripted and non-scripted rights to the idea.”

It’s a similar mindset with Future’s new educationally-focused series *Glow Up Your Grades*, recently launched on YouTube. “At one level, this is a factual series about helping kids through their GCSEs. But there’s a much bigger agenda here about how we can lean on our in-house resources to build an educational business.”



**“A magazine article inspired us to commission *On The Record*... We’re monetising that across various media channels – but we’ve also sold both the scripted and non-scripted rights to the idea.”**

John Farrar, Future Studios

In terms of ‘bonus’ revenue streams, Farrar says shortform episodes can be woven together for TV distribution. Future, for example, licences content via TVF International. Karen Young, CEO of distributor Orange Smarty, says she is exploring shortform content “as a way of increasing revenue streams via AVOD. Platforms such as YouTube and Facebook allow for a more targeted demographic approach. In addition, rights flexibility allows us to explore multiple platform penetration.”

Sub-10 minute titles in her catalogue include *Face The Consequences*, *How Not To Die*, *Students On The Edge*, *Visible Farmer* and *Skin Deep*, a series of cinematic shorts focusing on six people with extreme skin issues. Going forward, says Young, “we want to explore cuts from full length programmes that can shorter narratives.”

Young’s point is a reminder that, sitting alongside all of the above, is a parallel model, where content creators spin off ancillary content from existing longform programming. To cite one example among



many, A+E Networks’ History Channel US recently teamed up with genealogy brand Ancestry to create a shortform series to complement a TV franchise called *History’s Greatest Of All Time With Peyton Manning*. Elsewhere, BBC Studios (BBCS) recently unveiled a content partnership with Snapchat. Included in the deal are highlights and behind the scenes videos from *Top Gear* and *BBC Earth*.

Historically, such content would have been used to direct audiences towards TV. But increasingly it is used to meet young audiences where they are and to generate new revenues. To underline the latter point, BBCS has just launched an in-house ad sales function to drive revenue across social platforms. Gary Webber, BBCS group head of digital advertising, says the new sales operation “will enhance existing revenue streams” by giving advertisers access to a global reach of around 4.7 billion views. To date, BBCS has commissioned around 50 hours of original social formats. As the ad model matures, it should sustain more shortform originations.

At this juncture, it is worth noting that shortform factual doesn’t necessarily have to deliver immediate ROI. Europe’s public broadcasters, not bound by commercial imperatives, look to shortform to achieve pro-social objectives – often related to youth or education programming.

Similarly, Derren Lawford, founder and CEO of Dare Pictures, says “shortform can be a valuable entry point for new, diverse voices. It also has value if you’re looking to build partnerships with talent. There’s also a healthy relationship between shortform and festivals, which speaks more to reputation.”

Lawford’s eye is primarily on the broadcast and streamer market: “But if I felt an idea was right for the digital first market, I’d probably work with one of the sector’s specialists like After Party. There is an argument that the content industry would benefit from more creative co-productions between digital and traditional producers.”

Shortform can also be a great way of vocalising what a brand stands for. Paramount-owned MTV has just unveiled a new four-part digital series called *MTV Faces*, which explores grief through the eyes of celebrity guests. This follows previous digital series such as *Queerphany* and *Drunk History: Black Stories*. Cat Collins, VP, international, digital & social, MTV Entertainment Studios, says: “If *Faces* generates revenue or leads people back to other channels, that’s great. But for us the real consideration is how we are perceived by younger audiences and talent. If someone watches *MTV Faces* and feels like they needed to hear that conversation, we’ve done our job.” **TBI**

# Factual Hot Picks

From the depths of the ocean to the inner workings of the human mind, TBI selects some of the hottest factual titles coming to market

## Soul Of The Ocean



**Producer:** Terra Mater Studios, Howard Hall Productions & Mark Fletcher Productions

**Distributor:** Authentic Distribution

**Broadcaster:** The WNET Group, in association with PBS and CPB (US)

**Logline.** Underwater documentary exploring the peaceful symbiotic relationships shared between marine life in oceans across the planet

**D**ive deep beneath the waves and explore how aquatic species have developed to co-operate with each other and why biodiversity is so critical to the health of our oceans' ecosystems.

As Sabine Holzer, head of specialist factual at Terra Mater Studios, explains: "Most people feel the ocean is a dangerous place characterised by constant violent predation, where the only relationship between species is that big fish eat little fish. But this is not the primary characteristic of life in the ocean."

In this 50-minute documentary, veteran underwater filmmaker Howard Hall reveals how marine life and animal behaviour in the ocean really works.

"Peaceful co-operation between species is far more ubiquitous than predation and violence," says Holzer. "Complex marine life communities have evolved from interspecies relationships – capturing the underwater behavioral sequences of the co-operation between species is at the heart of *Soul Of The Ocean*."

The film explores habitats from coral reefs to kelp forests, coasts to open waters – as well as the darkest depths – while meeting humpback whales, tiny sea horses, anemone fish, cleaner fish and shrimps, turtles, dugongs and their strange and surprising symbiotic companions.

"Spectacular underwater cinematography reveals communities of interdependent marine species and highlights the critical role biodiversity plays in maintaining a healthy ocean," says Holzer.

Mirjam Strasser, head of sales & acquisitions at Authentic Distribution, adds that the global nature of the subject matter adds to the international appeal of the doc, which "illustrates the critical role of biodiversity in maintaining the health of our oceans, which is a pressing global issue."

She adds: "The documentary's unique perspective on the extraordinary co-operative relationships between species, as well as the film's spectacular underwater cinematography, are sure to fascinate and intrigue a global audience."







**The Real Fatal Attraction**

**Producer:** Wag Entertainment

**Distributor:** Wag Entertainment

**Broadcaster:** ITVX (UK)

**Logline:** Documentary revealing for the first time the full true story of a woman who set out to destroy the life of a man who ended their affair

This 75-minute documentary tells a real-life British thriller story – the case of Anisah Ahmed and Iqbal Mohammed.

In 2010, 22-year-old Ahmed made the first of many social media approaches to barrister Mohammed purporting to be

seeking career advice. Her online overtures eventually led to a meeting and an affair

But when Ahmed discovered Iqbal was married and he broke off their dalliance, she embarked on a multi-layered plot of revenge. Over the years, she carried out a series of acts against Iqbal, claiming she was a victim of violent behaviour.

“The full story hasn’t been told before,” reveals Janice Strangward, SVP of sales at Wag Entertainment, with the doc featuring police footage that has never been seen before while many of the interviewees have never spoken about the case.

“Central to the film is a very personal account from victim Iqbal Mohammed; it was brave of him to agree to be interviewed. Doing so meant talking about his affair and how it nearly cost him his marriage.”

Starting with faking social media accounts and threatening calls, Ahmed’s actions escalated to staging a kidnap, a near-fatal stabbing and ultimately a false allegation of multiple rapes, which left his life in ruins.

“The subject of male harassment isn’t something you hear much about in the media; I can’t think of another documentary that addresses this subject,” adds Strangward of the film.

**44 Hours**

**Producers:** Yes TV, Neue Celluloid Fabrik Filmproduktion

**Distributor:** Yes Studios

**Broadcaster:** Yes TV (Israel), SWR (Germany), Arte (France)

**Logline:** Documentary about a man who is locked into his own body for almost two days and is completely aware of his surroundings

This is the shocking true story of Gil Avni, who appeared brain dead and was seemingly unconscious in an intensive care unit for almost two days.

As his family made funeral plans and his friends visited for the last time, none suspected that Avni could hear and understand everything that was happening around him. Just as he came to accept his imminent death, Avni woke up, 44 hours later.

“The producer, Einat-Hana Shamir, along with her team and the team at Yes Docu, were given amazing access to

everyone involved with this incredible case,” reveals Sharon Levi, MD at Yes Studios.

“Gil Avni was very generous with his time, re-living his experiences and thoughts in great detail, and his family members were wonderfully helpful, especially his wife.”

Medical staff also shared their thoughts on this unusual case that has doctors baffled, yet has changed the way in which they approach similar situations.

“For example, coma patients will be talked about by name (rather than bed number) and



they will be told that people are fighting for them. It will no longer be taken for granted that they are brain dead,” says Levi.

“I think viewers everywhere will find it a fascinating watch, as everyone could put themselves

in Gil’s shoes and realise the horror he went through. Once you start watching you just have to finish as it’s such an incredible story, a mystery, and you need to know how it plays out,” adds the exec. **TBI**



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# Breaking barriers

Southeast Asia may not be ready to challenge the dominance of North Asia's TV format giants yet, but shows from Thailand and Malaysia are raising the bar across this fast-growing region, writes Marco Ferrarese

Asian TV formats have travelled around the world for decades, with shows like *Ninja Warrior*, *Iron Chef* and *Dragon's Den* becoming some of the world's best known and replicated. But looking at their nations of origin, it's either Japan, which has churned out dozens of TV formats for decades, or South Korea. K-dramas already sold very well in their original form and language, but the global success of MBC's singing format *The Masked Singer* opened new avenues for the tiny nation of a million entertainment wonders.

However, Asia is a huge continent, and even though it is Japanese and Korean programming (plus their entertainment and music industries at large) that still

lead the pack and maintain the strongest foothold in the West, there are new and interesting shows coming out of the East and from Southeast of Asia, in particular.

Without doubt, the country that has shown the most creativity in terms of both imagining and adapting formats, especially unscripted, is Thailand. The 'Land of Smiles' has a strong track record with TV and more open-mindedness compared to its immediate neighbours. Some of the most ingenious, inclusive and even touching commercials in the world come from Thailand and span everything from LGBTQ lip care to cancer charity and life insurance. Don't forget that it was the elaborate masks used in the Thai version of *The Masked Singer*, rather than the South Korean original,

*The Wall Duet* is a recent Thai format that has been remade in Brazil and The Netherlands





that first caught the eye of a Fox executive who was vacationing in Thailand and which ultimately initiated the format's global success.

"Thailand is the best place in Southeast Asia for format exports due to the competitiveness of their entertainment show ecosystem, higher budgets and production values, a more developed international sales infrastructure, and creativity, which includes a distinct sense of kookiness," says Daryl Kho, a Singapore-based author and media veteran who recently headed formats in Asia for Banijay Rights.

## Cultural connections

Leading Thai format-creating companies include BEC World, a broadcaster, distributor and producer, and production company Zense, which created *Beat The 60 Seconds*, a gameshow whose contestants have a minute to complete a random task in order to access to a vault full of prizes. It was adapted in Indonesia in 2020.

Because of similarities in tastes, culture and budgets, the biggest buyers of Thai formats remain in neighbouring Cambodia and Vietnam, but shows are travelling. The most impressive recent case is *The Wall Duet* (*Rong Kham Kam Pang*) made for Thailand's TV Channel 23 by media firm Workpoint Entertainment.

Even though it's a singing format, *The Wall Duet* is unique: can the participant recognise a person's voice from their wailing and recognise who they are without ever seeing them? In each episode, three superstars are invited to duet with a mysterious singer who stays hidden behind a wall. They don't know his/her identity, and are given clues to find out who that person is.

After being sold to Vietnam, *The Wall Duet* was first exported to Latin America and adapted by SBT in Brazil, and then debuted in Europe on New Year 2022 on Dutch broadcaster RTL 4, the nation's most-watched commercial station, as *Secret Duets*. The Thai format has since been optioned across Europe including in Italy, Spain and France. It may be early days to hail another success with the calibre of *The Masked Singer*, but it's an important achievement for Thailand and the rest of Southeast Asia's incredibly diverse and fast-growing entertainment industry.

## Import-export potential

While Southeast Asian cinema, particularly from Indonesia, is earning increasing recognition at film festivals around the world and impressive viewership numbers on Netflix, other television industries across the region still lag behind Thailand. They have also tended to adapt international formats to add to their own successful local variations.

One such example is the well-travelled mystery music gameshow *I Can See Your Voice*, which aired first in the Philippines in 2017. Produced and distributed locally by ABS-CBN Entertainment and based on the South Korean format of the same name, it quickly became a local hit with five seasons.

But there are more global opportunities emerging: Malaysia's first satellite television and IPTV provider Astro has already created some well-performing local formats that could be repackaged for international sales and adaptation, especially to Islamic nations.

One particular example was *Imam Muda* (*Young Imam*), a format targeted to the country's majority of ethnic Malays, who are muslims, and which ran for three seasons. Produced first in 2010, this original Malaysian show focused on a group of ten young Malay men aged between 19 and 27 who competed to become the best Islamic scholar.

Because *Imam Muda* was the most-watched format

*Beat The 60 Seconds* has travelled regionally, selling into Indonesia in 2020



in the history of Astro Oasis, a channel dedicated to Islamic programming, it could certainly appeal to other Islamic nations near and far, ranging from Indonesia and Saudi Arabia to Pakistan, or could even be exported to north Africa's Islamic countries.

Other popular Malaysian formats with a wider, non-religious appeal are *Raja Lawak*, a comedian-based talent show that requires contestants to improvise their jokes based on a set stage theme. Another local Malay show that is rating is *Gegar Vaganza*, a singing format that sees professional, often famous and retired, Malaysian singers competing to win a cash prize.

Such IP reflects the range of formats on offer in Southeast Asia and the success of shows such as *Wall Duet* looks likely to draw more attention to this rising world of vibrant, special and often quirky unscripted TV formats. **TBI**

# Format Hot Picks

From adventures in the most remote corners of the planet to music made from everyday household items, here are TBI's top format selections

## Stranded On Honeymoon Island

**Producer:** PIT

**Distributor:** Red Arrow Studios International

**Broadcaster:** VTM2 (Belgium)

**Logline:** Couples matched by experts are stranded on a deserted island. Isolated and pitted against the forces of nature, will true love blossom – and survive?

**P**art dating show, part adventure format, *Stranded On Honeymoon Island* sees couples matched with a romantic partner by experts and then promptly abandoned together on a deserted tropical island.

These fledgling relationships are put to the test as the couples live together and fend for themselves with few resources. Marooned and alone, they must communicate and collaborate to get by, with nowhere to run when the going gets tough.

“During the development process we found a lot of studies that indicated when you go through really tough experiences together it can enhance attraction so the premise ‘can the toughest journey be the quickest route to love’ was the base line we kept coming back to,” says Rasmus Steentoft, creative director at Snowman Productions, which originated the format.

Before being stranded, the couples go through a special casting process, overseen by psychologists, with Steentoft explaining:

“We devised a special speed-dating casting event, where 30 men and 30 women all met each other for 30 seconds, after which four couples were picked to take part in the show, based on chemistry and feedback. They don’t know who they had been matched with though, so it was still a big surprise when they meet at the altar.

“Ultimately, we were looking for people who were adventurous and wanted to find love,” Steentoft adds.

In each episode, crates wash ashore containing tools crucial to their survival, personal greetings from home, or even a little luxury to sweeten their day. After two weeks the couples are separated and return to civilisation, where they must make a life-changing decision – whether to renew their commitment and stay together after their island adventure or go their separate ways.

Steentoft says that the format is “very scalable” and reveals: “We are already working on a stripped version. The cast would need to be increased and a few more format pillars added, but that isn’t difficult.”



Top  
Pick



## Tempting Fortune

**Producer:** Voltage TV

**Distributor:** Cinefix Rights

**Broadcaster:** Channel 4 (UK) & Roku (North America)

**Logline:** Contestants embark on an 18-day trek in the wilderness, where they are tempted by luxuries that will deplete their prize fund

Contestants must choose between cash and comfort in this new 6 x 60-minute adventure competition format, which follows 12 strangers who are dropped in the heart of a remote wilderness to compete for an epic prize fund.

“It’s an arduous journey through the hostile terrain of the Eastern Cape in South Africa,” reveals Sanjay Singhal, CEO of show producer Voltage TV.

“They’ll tackle steep, giant sand dunes the height of a multi-storey building; long, bruising treks through thicket; wading through rivers up to their chests in cold water; and rope climbs up a rocky cliff face,” shares the exec.

Winning the prize money sounds simple enough – all the travellers must do is reach their destination without spending it. However, there’s one extra catch: while the contestants battle increasing hunger and exhaustion during their 18-day trek, they will come across some of the most tantalizing creature comforts on Earth, all offered at the world’s most exorbitant prices. And every time someone caves, there’s that much less for everyone to share.

Singhal reveals some of the fiendishly expensive items on offer at waystations that have been purpose-built in the African wilderness to tempt the weary adventurers.

“An American diner offers burgers and shakes while a vending machine has chocolate bars at just £400 (\$481) each. A luxury spa brings massages, hot tubs and power showers – and we’ve even built a quintessential British living room, complete with (British TV series) *EastEnders* on the TV and takeaway pizza for that much-needed night on the sofa.”

As their journey progresses, the contestants face moral

dilemmas, peer pressure and extreme temptation in a show that is much about coping with willpower as it is the wilderness.

“Internationally successful formats which return season after season are what every distributor looks for, and *Tempting Fortune* has that potential,” adds Richard Life, head of acquisitions at Cinefix Rights, who sees great opportunity in the format for international adaptation.



## The Beatbox

**Producers:** Something Special, Blue Circle & Naked

**Distributor:** Fremantle

**Broadcaster:** RTL4 (Netherlands)

**Logline:** Musical gameshow in which celebrity teams compete to win as many everyday objects as possible to compile a weird orchestra and create a performance of a well-known song

This musical gameshow format sees two celebrity teams compete by recreating iconic songs with nothing more than household objects.

“A tumble dryer, chainsaw, and a pair of skis are just a few examples of the many objects used in this captivating show,” reveals Hidde Pel, head of development at Fremantle Netherlands.

“Throughout the show, the teams play games to win as many useful music-making items as possible. No instruments are allowed, but can a coffee machine or bread toaster hit the right tune?”

During each instalment, the teams play interactive musical games to collect the most household items as they build up to show-stopping performances.

“Creativity, imagination, and musicality are important ingredients to succeed in this game show,” says Pel, who adds that during the production of the Dutch series: “The celebrity teams were highly competitive in each show and enjoyed participating as they were not tested on their knowledge but had a blast of fun.”

Pel says that he sees the format as “the ultimate feel-good show”, which he believes has great potential to travel internationally.

“Have you ever tapped your feet to the beat, used pots and pans as a makeshift drum kit, or used your drink glass to chime a tune? You’re not the only one.

“Music is universal, and this format proves that music can be made from anything.” **TBI**

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# Kids Hot Picks

From a homebound comedy to an underwater preschool adventure, TBI takes a look at some of the hottest kids series heading to market



Top  
Pick

## The Super Heroes Of Nature

**Producers:** Moonworks Productions & Amopix Studios

**Distributor:** Dandelooo

**Broadcasters:** TV5 Monde, Arte Editions, Noozy (France), RTS (Switzerland), Télé-Québec (Canada)

**Logline:** Hybrid kids series exploring the natural world through animation and archive footage to educate young viewers about the incredible world around them

**A**imed at 4- to 10-year-olds and families, this children’s hybrid animation opens up the natural world for young viewers with a deep dive into the lives of organisms both large and small.

Written by Charlotte Schmidt, the 30 x 3-minute series uses playful metaphors and references to popular culture, to take an often funny and humorous look at biodiversity.

Each episode is built around an animal and their environment and, as Emmanuèle Pétry Sirvin, producer & head of international at Dandelooo, explains, the series covers a range of creatures.

“There are many animals and organisms that feature in this fascinating show such as a sea cucumber that can poison a shark, a bird that chirps like a chainsaw, an ant that kills a cow, the blob which appears like scrambled eggs but has nothing to do with any living creature we know, a lizard which makes babies on its own for example. And who knew that octopuses have nine brains? Or that dolphins see with their ears?”

The series digs into biological notions such as animal intelligence, social behaviours, reproduction and the roles of the cells or the immune system.

It uses a blend of filmed archives and animation to tell its stories, which Sirvin says is well-suited to the format, with the footage identifying the animal and their environment, while the animation illustrate biological or behavioural phenomena.

“This is where the very definition of animation becomes clear. Charlotte Schmidt’s graphic style – simple and uncluttered – focuses on revealing what is essential and stimulates our knowledge and understanding. The representation of ‘super powers’ is then illustrated before our eyes. The dialogue and response between illustrations and filmed reality create didactic and rhythmic visual writing which educates and entertains.”

Sirvin adds the series will open kids eyes to “fascinating phenomena about the tiniest of creatures which are typically not seen or in sight in their daily lives.

“Kids will learn and understand how they can relate to invisible characters in nature and therefore will want to help and protect them.”

The series has already secured a number of pre-sales in both Europe and North America and is set to be delivered for broadcast in November 2023.



**On Our Own**

**Producer:** Ananey Studios

**Distributor:** APC Kids

**Broadcaster:** Kan Kids (Israel)

**Logline:** Four youngsters are left to fend for themselves when their parents are stuck abroad – with only their fun-loving, big kid of an uncle around to help

It’s a new spin on the classic ‘kids left at home’ formula with this 56 x 22-minute live-action series, which follows what happens

when the bickering Tzur family children – Mika, Ronnie, Aya and Nevo – are forced to manage on their own.

With their parents stuck abroad, the youngsters only have uncle Za’atar for supervision – and he’s not that much help.

“He’s the fun, loving uncle who’s supposed to keep an eye on the kids while mom and dad are gone. His own Peter Pan syndrome and his lack of parenting experience do get in the way, but he tries his best.

“The kids love him, and they often end up taking care of him just as much as the other way round,” reveals Lionel Marty, managing director of APC Kids.

“The Tzur kids put a comedic twist on each task, from groceries and cleaning to managing money and handling repairs.

“They go about each little challenge with not the most straight-forward approach, but with their own sneaky sense of resourcefulness, things soon escalate into funny predicaments,” shares Marty, who says that kids will identify with the imagined freedom of being home alone.

“As they grow, kids soon start to fantasize about doing grown-up things and feeling independent from their parents. This show allows them to have this experience by proxy, in a fun way, while illustrating how hard it can be, how important team work is, and how they can contribute without rushing to adulthood.”

**Maari - Adventures At The Reef**

**Producer:** Bigchild Entertainment

**Distributor:** ZDF Studios

**Broadcaster:** KIKA (Germany)

**Logline:** Underwater adventures for preschoolers with the titular squid and her friends as they overcome everyday and environmental obstacles

Animated series for preschool children, aged 3-6, following the adventures of Maari the squid and her two best friends: Tuts, a turtle, and Fin, a crab.

“Wherever there are problems in the Blue Bay Reef, the three of them are there, together with the little plankton Spotti,” says Katharina Pietzsch, director junior at ZDF Studios.

“They are up for every adventure and together they are unstoppable. Maari and her friends are experiencing everyday

adventures at the reef – and learn to live through them by sticking together and helping each other.”

Diversity and environmental protection are core themes and Pietzsch explains that the 20 x 7-minute series deals with issues of pollution and plastic waste that are a danger to the underwater world.

“The series shows how even small objects, like old fishing hooks can be a mortal danger to underwater creatures. Having said this, the series is aimed at

preschool children, so these issues are of course dealt with subtly and in a child friendly way - raising awareness but not scaring the children.”

Pietzsch says that she thinks kids across the globe will “love the cute heroes, the beautiful colors and the richness of the

underwater world that makes *Maari – Adventures At The Reef* really appealing visually.

“Together with the happy tunes and positive message of the series, we expect this 3D animated series to be a real hit with our youngest viewers worldwide.” **TBI**





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## Last Word Jon Loew

### FAST and furious

**“Determining the right time to launch into FAST was contingent upon having a sufficient amount of exclusive content to keep a channel going”**

For many in the production community, last autumn was the first time heading back to MIPCOM after putting travel and in-person meetings on hold for a couple of years. As many FAST providers were emerging, many of the companies they sought to do business with were still in hiding. We continued to attend international markets during COVID and boy did it pay off.

At the start of 2020, the streaming TV business was really starting to pick up steam, but by the time most companies reconvened in Cannes in October last year, there was the undeniable reality that the business had not only greatly matured, it had exploded. More than that, there was a new buzz in the air; a new excitement. That energy stemmed from the possibilities and opportunities around yet another mutation in the streaming media landscape – FAST. And if FAST was the bright newcomer on la Croisette last market, I think it’s fair to say it will be the star of MIPTV.

There are several aspects of FAST that make it extremely appealing. On the technical side, launching and distributing a FAST channel is far less complicated and expensive than launching a cable channel or even a standalone SVOD or AVOD channel. Dynamic ad insertion also makes promoting and monetising your content easy. And the EPGs associated with connected and Smart TVs give consumers a navigation experience not unlike what they’ve been used to for years on cable.

All of these things have made it simpler and ‘faster’ to take a direct-to-consumer approach. In fact, there are thousands of channels catering to every genre, interest and fan group there is, from British mysteries to horror films to standalone channels for long-running TV series like *Law & Order* and *Doctor Who*.

As one of the earlier adopters of the FAST model, we are often asked by our colleagues, “Is going FAST always a good idea?” Well, if the buzz heading into MIPTV is any indication, there is still tremendous opportunity. In the US, where FAST is fairly advanced (over 1,500 channels), there is still huge growth potential: 216 million monthly active users driving \$4.1bn in ad revenue are projected for this year alone.

So that brings me to another question we hear often: What really works in this environment? It seems like

a lot of the hype around FAST’s potential has been focused on monetising underused library content – programming that may not be hot right now but deserves to see the light of day again.

That’s great for companies trying to squeeze the last remaining bit of revenue out of their archives. Big, globally recognisable franchises like *Friends* or *The Office* or *Seinfeld* could sustain a standalone channel of their own, but could a channel without a notable brand attached really capture the attention the viewer who is scrolling through a thousand channels looking for something to watch? Aligning yourself with a hit show or brand is ideal, but in absence of that, creating a channel that has an unmistakable association with the kinds of content viewers are looking for is imperative.

At Big Media, we’re just getting started. We weighed a lot of these considerations before joining forces with a seasoned AVOD/FAST channel provider called wedotv.

With built-in audiences and several well-established platform relationships in the UK Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Italy, we had a head start right out of the gate. We were smart enough to realise that a Big Media channel would not mean a lot to consumers – and we are producers, not channel distribution experts.

So for us, determining the right time to launch into FAST was contingent upon having a sufficient amount of exclusive content to keep a channel going and refresh it regularly, as well as aligning ourselves with experienced people to do it right. And as far as feeling like we were late to the party, well, FAST is still growing in the US and it is only just starting to take off globally. But the projections for growth are impressive. FAST revenues in the US are set to reach \$10bn by 2027, while in Europe revenue will exceed \$1bn by 2027. The UK is the most advanced market, but Canada, Brazil, Germany and Mexico are the next markets to watch.

It’s not too late to get a FAST strategy in place. In fact, if you have compelling content and solid technical and brand partners, it’s just the right time to ride the tide.

However, as we charge ahead fast and furiously, content owners need to remember that like every gold rush, not every FAST platform will prosper or even survive. Don’t charge ahead so quickly that you forget to protect your assets. **TBI**

Jon Loew is CEO of Big Media Holdings, a production company with offices in New York, Prague, London, Miami, Delhi and Munich



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