

TBI Television Business International

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Editor's note Richard Middleton

Maintaining momentum

This note is being written as I travel back from SeriesMania in Lille, following a whirlwind 72 hours that threw me back to those halcyon days of 2019. This time there were myriad forms to fill in, swabs to be taken and masks to be worn, but the event itself felt like a mini celebration marking the fact that perhaps, finally, we have learned to live with this thing.

It also provided an opportunity to see how the world has changed, because while lockdowns over the past 18 months have tended to have a groundhog-type effect on our existence, the hum of human activity has continued apace. Buildings have sprung up where once there was only weed-strewn concrete, new companies have been formed and grown through adversity, and the process of creating great entertainment on screen has persisted through one of the most challenging periods for generations.

This was evidenced in some of the shows at SeriesMania, where drama took centre stage and where numerous screenings allowed creatives to again experience first-hand the effects of their work on people's emotions. Execs from the US-based studios were on hand to talk up their own handywork over the past year or so as well, building entire content ecosystems that are now offering a myriad of nascent opportunities and challenges of their own on a worldwide basis.

Some things have changed to a lesser extent. Diversity remains a major topic of conversation and action is being taken, but as English dramatist Jack Thorne pointed out at the virtual Edinburgh TV Festival, the industry has a way to go yet before it reflects the audience it aims to serve. We explore the issue in this edition, specifically looking at what is being done to broaden socioeconomic diversity and asking why so many companies are so disinclined to talk about it.

We also bring you a plethora of fantastic new children's shows heading to market, a deep dive into the world of ViacomCBS's kids push with Nina Hahn, and the latest content requirements from the UK's biggest commissioners, as the industry seeks to continue its upwards momentum.

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Diversity Narendra Reddy

Why broadening diversity is vital for inclusion

The Africa Channel's Narendra Reddy discusses why broadening the definition of diversity can fuel inclusion. Deborah Williams' column will be back next month

Last year brought to the forefront the critical need for diversity and inclusion in every industry around the world. While the disparities didn't just happen overnight, the backdrop of a global pandemic and racial reckoning only helped to put a spotlight on a problem that for too long has been festering in the shadows.

This is especially true when it comes to representation in TV. Most major networks have largely ignored the needs of diverse Black audiences worldwide for too long. Although diversity is the buzzword of the day, representation in British TV has gone backward, with Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) down from 12.3% in 2019 to 11.8% in 2020, both on-screen and behind-the-scenes.

Striving for equity

Protests from Black creatives across the UK TV industry are forcing the industry to look head-on at the state of affairs within its folds and recognise that much work is needed to bring about a sense of equity.

Across the pond in the US, although a certain amount of progress has been made with on-screen talent in recent years, a recent McKinsey study determined that "inequity still persists and is deeply entrenched across the film and TV ecosystem."

According to the 2020 Hollywood Diversity Report, network heads are 92% male and 68% white (as of Sept 2020), and only 1 in 10 show creators are people of colour. But without the voices of diverse Black creators or decision-makers, there can be no real push to address the diversity within the diversity of Black audiences.

The lack of inclusive Black representation at the decision-making levels of companies contributes to an additional often hidden problem – the failure to acknowledge that Black audiences are not monolithic in their interests and in their viewing preferences, specifically the needs of the African diaspora.

The distinct needs of the rapidly growing Black diaspora – mainly individuals who have emigrated from Africa and the Caribbean to the American and

European continent – have largely gone unrecognised. In the US, this foreign-born audience represents nearly 20% of the total Black American population.

A small group of traditional television networks, streaming platforms and production companies have recognised the need. Still, they have faced numerous challenges to their growth, often lone wolves in an increasingly consolidated landscape.

Television platforms such as The Africa Channel, Demand Africa, Rok TV, Afro, and production companies such as [The Africa Channel's] TAC Studios continue to make strides in meeting the needs of Black audiences across the diaspora in a meaningful manner, bringing contemporary African entertainment and content from the diaspora to global markets. This continues to foster the cycle of inclusion by providing opportunities for Black creatives from the diaspora to showcase their work.

A recent partnership between Demand Africa and Samsung TV Plus has brought African content for the first time in history to Central and South America shortly after Afro-Mexicans were counted, also for the first time in history, on the 2020 Census. In Brazil, the partnership also led to bringing Afro-centric content to one of the largest African diasporas in the world.

In addition to increasing distribution opportunities, a conversation about serving diverse Black audiences would be incomplete without addressing content development and production. It was not until Disney's feature production of *Black Panther* that Africa received any attention as a source of stories and talent. Programmers need to find authentic stories that bridge cultures and reflect heritage in order to serve the unique needs of the Black diaspora audience. While *Black Panther* demonstrated the commercial appeal of such content globally, there's still so much to be done.

As the appetite for Black content continues to grow, representation of diversity within diversity of Black culture becomes that much more relevant, drawing audiences to Black voices across the continent and beyond because nuances in cultures matter. In the words of Nigeria's Grammy award-winning Afrobeats superstar Burna Boy: "In order for Black lives to matter, Africa must matter." **TBI**

Narendra Reddy is the EVP & general manager at The Africa Channel

About Town

Series business

Travel remains a tricky affair across much of the world but there are signs that the business is beginning to embrace face-to-face events once again, even the odd party or two. This is good news, especially for About Town.

As August came to an end, SeriesMania kicked off in Lille, France, offering an array of screenings and public-facing events as well as the three-day Forum that attracts professionals from across the drama ecosystem.

The Forum's opening party provided many with their first face-to-face networking opportunity for almost 18 months, as delegates swapped their respective lockdown tales together. Russia again underlined its growing importance on the scripted landscape, with the country's period drama *Red Rainbow* voted the winner of this year's Best Project Award at the annual co-pro pitching competition.



Alexander Rodnyansky of France's AR Content/ Non-Stop Production and writer Matt Jones picked up the €50,000 (\$60,000) prize for the 8 x 50-minute project, while WarnerMedia's president of EMEA excl China, Priya Dogra, and HBO Max general manager, Christina Sulebakk (centre), were among a raft of speakers in attendance on the executive side. They revealed HBO Max would be launching in the Nordics and Spain in the autumn, while Netflix's Larry Tanz underlined his streamer's thirst for Euro projects and Disney's EMEA president unveiled a new Karl Lagerfeld drama for the Mouse House.

Virtual engagement at Edinburgh

The 2021 Edinburgh TV Festival also made headlines and while physical meetings and parties were not possible, the virtual iteration again attracted an array of famous names.

Whoopi Goldberg (right) spoke of her life on and off the screen, while Greta Thunberg

joined Jo Nesbo to discuss her climate change work and how it relates to TV.

Comedian Billy Connolly (below) received this year's Lifetime Achievement Award and English dramatist Jack Thorne highlighted the lack of discussion around disability representation. Major UK commissioners from the likes of the BBC, ITV and Sky were also virtually in town to outline their latest requirements, as were an array of US-based

execs – including NBCUniversal's Susan Rovner and Amazon Studios' Jennifer Salke. Disney+, meanwhile, used its appearance to unveil *The Nautilus*, a 10-part live-action drama based on the classic Jules Verne novel *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* from Moonriver TV and Seven Stories.



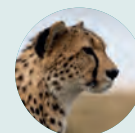
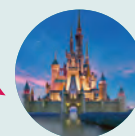
Swings and Roundabouts

60 Disney+ had initially aimed for 50 European originals on its streamer by 2024 but revealed that total is now set to hit 60 as the strategy expands

7 Sky's thirst for factual is only increasing, with a bumper order for seven new originals across its Documentaries, Crime, Nature and History channels, including *Chasing The Rains*

2.8 ITV boss Kevin Lygo was forced to defend its former ratings juggernaut *Love Island*, which saw 2.8 million viewers tune into the UK show's live finale this year, down by 600,000 on 2019

1 As proof that even deep-pocketed US tech giants don't always get what they want, Amazon Studios' Jen Salke admitted her disappointment on losing *Mare Of Easttown* during negotiation to HBO



Feeding the hungry beast

The future of kids TV is 'glocal', says ViacomCBS exec Nina Hahn, who tells TBI's Mark Layton how global streamers are opening doors to new opportunities

There's little doubt that children's content has a pivotal role to play in the ongoing success of any global streamer; after all, parents may sign up for new dramas, but kids demanding their favourite shows are likely to keep them subscribed.

However, with so many US studios now making the jump and going direct-to-consumer, often launching with a vault full of iconic IP, it isn't hard to see why smaller, indie creators might feel at risk of being muscled out of these new green pastures.

Nina Hahn, head of ViacomCBS International Studios' (VIS) Kids and SVP of production & development at Nickelodeon International, believes

the reverse is true; she sees plenty of opportunity for companies both big and small – so long as they can adapt to the shifting landscape.

"It's an incredibly hungry beast, probably the hungriest it has ever been in the history of time not only across our group, but all of the groups that are working in this space," says Hahn, who was appointed to her VIS Kids role upon the division's launch late last year.

This expanded remit sees the exec leading on sourcing and developing originals across genres for both ViacomCBS platforms and third parties, while also working closely with the studio's various production and development teams around the world.

Hahn took up her latest role, which sees her heading up ViacomCBS International Studios Kids, in October

"It's very important that we don't mix the notion of how many episodes with how important it always is to create great characters and great stories"





The Patrick Star Show is a recently launched spin-off from long-running Nickelodeon series *SpongeBob SquarePants*

Nickelodeon remains one of the world's biggest kids IP powerhouses, behind iconic series such as *Rugrats*, *SpongeBob SquarePants* and *Avatar: The Last Airbender*; but the way its shows are available is changing, with ViacomCBS' expanding global streamer Paramount+ and the recently announced European joint-venture with Comcast, Sky Showtime.

For Hahn, the growing variety of outlets is a boon. "At the end of the day, we are all content makers in this food chain and the more places that are gobbling up the content the better," she says.

"Obviously in the case of ViacomCBS, we have a lot of different ways now; whether it's Paramount+, which is starting its launches internationally, or whether it's linear or our digital side of things. There are so many different ways, even in our company alone, where content consumption is necessary."

Perhaps because of that appetite for IP, Hahn says that the company has an "open rolling pitching environment," which means that "anywhere and anytime anybody has a great idea" they should pitch it. The way deals are being struck are changing too, along with the landscape, and Hahn says that "being nimble" is one of the greatest assets right now.

"The original ideas that are coming to the table from independent producers have to find a way to get themselves up and running and we've seen lots of different models with which to do that," says Hahn. "Independent producers can work on a hybrid model, where some funding is happening from them or one particular buyer, and the rest of it built up with other buyers. So there are ways for them to get their content up and growing that isn't just a one-buyer situation."

Too short a season

One concern that crops up from producers is that streamers are typically ordering much shorter seasons than broadcast networks – which means a lot of development time spent on something that may not run for very long. But again, Hahn sees the silver lining.

"There is a tremendous amount of development that goes into any project, whether it's one episode or 52 episodes, that really hasn't changed. Whether it's a small order or a large order, is this notion that if you get a hit, you're going to have a second season," says the exec.

"It's very important that we don't mix the notion of how many episodes with how important it always is to create great characters, great stories and a project that people care about so as to push through the model of a short order or a longer order."

Hahn adds that the upside of shorter seasons is that creatives can work on improving a show more swiftly. "You can work through eight episodes of a series and then if you go back you can tweak what you need to make it stronger, more relevant."

A 'glocal' perspective

Hahn's role has her working with production and development teams across the world and the global roll out of Paramount+ allows for the creation of what she refers to as a 'glocal' voice through local original content that is then shown on the service worldwide.

In short, "the idea is making something everywhere and using something everywhere," just as it always has been on the linear side of the business.

Hahn explains: "We'll have amazing things coming from Paramount+ around the world as it rolls out, which is quite exciting. The stuff we've just spun through from the US is tried and tested; although it is born in the US, it lives on globally."

"Equally, we want to make sure we've got local content made in the regions where Paramount+ is starting to rollout. We're in the process of figuring out exactly what that's going to look like now and that content will speak to a lot of things that will also be global, but will have a certain local birth pattern to them, just as in the US."

Hahn also acknowledges that Viacom is in something of a unique position, with a large footprint in 175 countries, giving it access to animation talent from all over the world at a time when producers in some territories are finding such talent in short supply.

"That allows us the ability to work with the greatest talent of those regions – whether that's in Nigeria, or Israel, or Brazil, wherever it may be. We have been able to toggle and find talent that we feel is really strong and can cross culture by going outside of the main meat and potatoes of the UK and the US, where there's a lot going on."

It's clear this 'glocal' approach is an important part of the ViacomCBS strategy, which is to be expected from a company that has long sought to reflect the world in which kids live.

“If you’re really going to talk about diversity and inclusion then you actually have to show, not just tell, and in order to do that it means working on a diverse project with a diverse group of people,” says Hahn, highlighting some of the local co-productions Nickelodeon is working on. These include *The Twisted Timelines of Sammy & Raj*, the brand’s first collaboration with India’s Viacom18; *Spyders*, an original co-production with Israel’s Ananey Studios; and *Deer Squad*, which is a co-production with China’s iQiyi.

Of the latter, Hahn notes: “That again came from an idea from our Chinese partner, but is now head written by a western writer, and produced in China. So, a very global quilt production model for how we work.”

What’s in a name

While these newer productions certainly demonstrate the global reach of Paramount+ and ViacomCBS’ kids brands, the company is well aware of the role its legacy IP, such as *Rugrats* and *SpongeBob Squarepants*, play in drawing subscribers to the streamer.

“They’re a huge part of the business and we wear them with great pride because they weren’t always

“[Legacy IP are] a huge part of the business and we wear them with great pride, because they started as an idea like any other”.

Star Trek Prodigy (below) came about following the Viacom and CBS merger and *The Twisted Timelines Of Sammy & Raj* (bottom) is Nickelodeon’s first co-pro with India’s Viacom18

that; they started as an idea like any other of these ideas,” says Hahn

“What’s amazing about them is that they have been fantastic launch pads for Paramount+, because people know them, they trust them and we deliver on the content for them – and it brings people to the platform in a way that is really important for the business model and also really important for the content success. So they’re a tremendous rainmaker for us.”

These familiar brands can increasingly also serve as starting points for growing franchises, with Nickelodeon’s latest offerings including a *Rugrats* reboot, *Spongebob* spin-off *The Patrick Star Show* and *Star Trek Prodigy*, a children’s animation based on the long-running sci-fi franchise.

“To see some of these shows rebooted or spun-off is fantastic and now obviously with the ViacomCBS merger well behind us enough, one team having stuff like *Star Trek* is just an extension of that model that really works for us – being able to tell amazing stories with great characters that have Nickelodeon DNA, but things that are pre-sold, so people have a familiarity,” explains Hahn.

Turning over every rock

The big question, of course, remains, as always: where should the industry be looking for the next big kids hits? For Hahn, the answer is anywhere you can.

“Really, you have to look everywhere; digital and then the traditional outlets and then ideas that are just coming from pitches you receive from around the world. There’s never one place where more ideas are coming from than others,” says Hahn, though she does offer a few pointers. “There are definitely some ideas on the horizon that are really interesting – there is a lot of amazing work going on in Africa, specifically Nigeria, and Scandinavia, but by-and-large it’s always been about how can you look everywhere and turn over every rock.”

Hahn adds: “We’re always looking at YouTube, the publishing world, both comics and books, and at what we’re seeing trending. Then the country-by-country conversations that we have with our partners in all of the countries – who is bubbling up, what animator, what writer, what director and so on. We spend a lot of time just canvassing the world until we find it.”

Hahn’s ‘glocal’ hunt for the next big thing is certainly promising news for indies able to bring a great idea to the table with the potential to not only reflect the lives of kids in their territories, but also to resonate with young audiences around the world. The beast, after all, has quite an appetite. **TBI**



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Tapping a diverse talent pool

Recent years have seen the TV industry attempting to reflect the audience it serves, yet socioeconomic diversity remains little discussed and often ignored. Mark Layton explores why and who's doing what about it.

Socioeconomic diversity seems to be getting left behind in the big push for inclusivity.

While strides have absolutely been made within the TV industry as commissioners and producers attempt to address gender, ethnic and (if a little more slowly) disability representation in their programming and workforce, socioeconomic diversity is proving a tougher nut to crack.

When it came to researching this article, the silence from some major global players - and others across the industry - spoke volumes. Companies that are ordinarily willing, if not positively keen, to talk up their

Angelo Rules prodco Team TO runs a free-to-attend animation school

efforts to broaden diversity had nothing to add to the topic of socioeconomic diversity.

While we're focused here on kids TV - where a lack of representation on-screen and in the writers' room can impact upon the audience the hardest - these issues are applicable across the industry. And while it may not be a straightforward problem to accurately identify, it is a known issue. Research from UK regulator Ofcom, for example, has shown that TV workers are twice as likely to have attended private school, with only "a minority of workers" coming from non-professional family backgrounds.

Meanwhile, a study by the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre on social mobility in the screen industries (funded by industry-led skills body ScreenSkills) showed that in 2020, only 25% of the UK screen workforce came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, compared to 38% across the economy as a whole. This was the lowest level since social mobility questions were introduced in the Labour Force Survey in 2014 and while the statistics spanned the whole of the UK TV workforce, ScreenSkills head of unscripted and children's TV, Sarah Joyce, tells TBI that there is no reason to think kids TV is any different.

While some companies have proven remarkably reticent in discussing what they are doing to rectify this problem, others are taking direct action. Among the myriad initiatives run by ScreenSkills is the Children's TV Skills Fund, which is set up to provide in-house training on live-action kids productions to those programme makers that contribute to the fund.

"Children's TV provides excellent opportunities for people to start and develop their career in TV as it offers the potential to work across a range of different programme types," says Joyce. "Some are drawn to other areas of TV, but some will love the creativity and diversity of content in children's TV and stay."

This year, the Children's TV Skills Fund Council is funding a new entrant initiative that Joyce says will offer training and paid placement opportunities on children's productions "to those from groups under-represented in the industry."

This is in addition to the support that the fund provides in paid placements for trainees through ScreenSkills Trainee Finder, funding for on-the-job training for those looking to step-up via Children's TV Make a Move programme, and bursaries for individuals at all stages of their career.

Entry-level opportunities

One company that has partnered with ScreenSkills on bringing underrepresented talent into the industry is ViacomCBS, via the body's mentoring programme.

However, as Louise Bucknole, ViacomCBS Networks International's UK & Ireland VP of kids programming, tells TBI, that initiative is part of a broader strategy.

Bucknole, whose remit includes the Milkshake! strand on UK comcaster Channel 5 and the local version of kids' powerhouse Nickelodeon, reveals that the company is working to create entry-level opportunities for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. A new apprenticeship programme focused on school and college leavers offers 18-month placements to those "who might not be able to get into

the media because they haven't gone to university," says Bucknole, who reveals that two apprentices are joining the kids programming team in September, out of 17 across the company UK-wide.

"One is going to be a commissioning and programming assistant, so is going to be working on Milkshake! commissioning and also Nick programming and then we've also got another starting who is going to be a creative and digital assistant, so they're going to be creating assets for us for use on our social media, websites and also creative assets on air," says Bucknole. "With that comes full training within the department as well. So they get to go through on-the-job training, [learning] specific skillsets."

Alongside that, ViacomCBS is also part of the UK government's Kickstart Scheme, which offers six-month work placements for 16- to 24-year-olds who, Bucknole explains, "are at risk of long-term unemployment or who haven't been able to get a job for various reasons."

A production assistant has joined Milkshake! via the scheme, as one of 20 across the whole company. The US-based operator also acted as a sponsor, executive partner, and was on the judging panel of The Secret Story Draw, a competition set up to "encourage underrepresented animators and illustrators into the kids' industry". It saw winners given placements in different animation companies, such as Aardman, Moonbug and King Bert.

And it doesn't stop there. The company is involved in the BFI See Yourself On Screen initiative, which gives young people from all backgrounds the training and opportunity to create a mini-TV show on screen – and led to short films being placed on Milkshake!.

Socioeconomic diversity also falls under the ViacomCBS-wide 'no diversity, no commission' policy, which Bucknole notes is "an absolute rubber stamp on whether you get a commission." She adds that on-screen, Nickelodeon shows such as *Hey, Arnold!* and *Rugrats* have been portraying this for years now, alongside more recent series such as *Hunter Street* and Milkshake!'s *Go Green With The Grimwades*.

"We've changed the entry level of our apprentices and the placements we have, because those people that come into those initiatives are going to influence us with ideas that they have," says Bucknole, highlight the importance of bringing new voices into the industry. "As that happens more and more in other companies, that will probably become part of the conversation."

Seeking authenticity

Across the Atlantic, Canadian pubcaster CBC is making similar moves. Drew Mullin, who leads

"If you tap into a different origin you get different sensibilities - that's how you enrich the content that you produce"

Guillaume Hellouin,
TeamTO



production for children’s content at CBC Kids, which broadcasts shows including *Big Blue* and *Addison*, tells TBI: “We are actively pursuing opportunities to increase the representation and diversity of our CBC Kids’ team through new hires, secondment opportunities and working with emerging creators and third-party producers.”

This, explains Mullin, includes a commitment that by 2021-22, “half of all new hires for executive and senior management positions will be from Indigenous people, visible minorities, or people with disabilities; and that retention and promotion rates for people from these three groups will be doubled.”

Mullin adds representation of many different types of families and households has “always been a significant goal in CBC Kids’ programming” and explains that “while gender and race have been top of mind lately, socioeconomic representation is equally as important. We look for authentic stories that reflect our audience and their families and weave these topics into their narratives.”

Untapped talent pool

On the production side, TeamTO, the French animation studio behind shows such as *Angelo Rules* and *Mighty Mike*, is having great success in hiring and training up talent from underprivileged backgrounds.

Since 2018, TeamTO has been running the ECAS initiative, a non-profit free-of-charge animation school at its Cartoucherie campus in Bourg-lès-Valence, which it established for students with no prior experience or qualification, who might otherwise not have access to an advanced educational program.

ViacomCBS’s Channel 5, which airs *Go Green With The Grimwades*, offers placements for those who haven’t attended university

As TeamTO president and CEO Guillaume Hellouin tells TBI, the initiative allows them to access and train up a “big pool of potentially outstanding animators lying there untapped.”

The participants – roughly 30 per year – take part in a “very intensive, but short programme” where they receive on-the-job experience for six days a week for around seven-to-eight months. Hellouin notes: “Officially they get 1,000 hours of practice, but in-fact it is close to 2,000. In traditional animation school they get just 100 hours, so there’s a big difference.”

At the end of the course, if the participants graduate – and almost all do – then they receive a job offer from TeamTO. “We offer them a six-month contract, but they are not obliged to work for us. If they find a job in another studio they are free to do it,” explains Hellouin.

“Most of them did the first six months with us. Some of them found other jobs in Canada or elsewhere in France. Out of the 90 that graduated, 77 are still with us.”

The ECAS initiative went international this year, with TeamTO partnering with Canada’s House of Cool to expand the curriculum to include a course on storyboarding that will be taught at the company’s Toronto offices, as well as TeamTO’s Cartoucherie campus.

Team TO co-founder and SVP of development and production Corinne Kouper explains: “It started because there was an animator from L’ECAS who had an amazing talent for storyboarding and this guy had never been on any course, had never been in an art school.”

Impressing the team with his natural ability and “absolutely amazing” work, Kouper reveals: “We hired him as assistant storyboard and he’s still here doing that.”

Hellouin adds that talent shortages in both countries means TeamTO and House of Cool were each looking for good storyboard artists and, after their unexpected inspiration, the expansion to the initiative made perfect sense. He also reveals that early discussions are underway with production companies in Africa and US that could see it replicating the ECAS initiative.

Summing up the importance of the initiative to TeamTO, and the need for such representation across the industry, Hellouin says: “Every animator is an artist and every artist has their own sensibility. So if you tap into a different origin, you get different sensibilities and that is how you enrich the content that you produce. The more diverse you build your crew, the better it will be.” **TBI**



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What UK kids' commissioners want

Global streamers, pay TV operators and public broadcasters are all competing for the attention of UK youngsters. Mark Layton & Richard Middleton explore what bosses at Netflix, the BBC, Sky and others are looking for

Kids and youth TV is in demand like never before, as global streamers vie with broadcasters for eye-catching content to differentiate their offerings. The competition is driving content trends but also an evolution in financing, as delegates at this summer's Children's Media Conference (CMC) found out. Here, TBI dives into the programming plans, business models, rights requirements and strategies of the biggest UK players.

Patricia Hidalgo, director of BBC Childrens & Education

Appointed last year, Patricia Hidalgo heads up arguably the most important player in the UK kids programming space, with the BBC commissioning and acquiring across animation and live action for all age ranges.

Fuelled by that public broadcaster remit and a sizeable budget, the former Turner exec says that portraying kids from across the whole of the UK – “from all nations, ethnic and social backgrounds and disabilities” – remains the key focus.

“We do that really well on screen, but our commitment to diversity

“We are very local in one sense; we make children see themselves on screen, whereas other global companies are not doing that”

Patricia Hidalgo, BBC



and inclusion is not just on screen, she adds, “and we’re actively looking for new ideas, new voices and diverse talent to tell their stories to our audiences.” Accordingly, the BBC used CMC to launch its Ignite talent initiative, while a £300,000 (\$410,000) diversity fund has also been created.

Despite its decades-long UK presence, Hidalgo admits that newer streamers are putting increasing pressure on the BBC. “Kids have more choice than any other generation of kids, so why would they want to come to us? We’re no longer the biggest player in town and these global companies do great content and they have big budgets – and of course our kids love that content.”

However, the *My World Kitchen*, *Pablo* and *Hey Duggee*

Hey Duggee (left) has been a big hit for UK pubcaster the BBC, while streaming service Netflix unveiled *Sharkdog* (bottom) last year

broadcaster is, she says, “really representing and reflecting” its audience, unlike the global streamers. “We are very local in one sense; we make children see themselves on screen, whereas other global companies are still not doing that. For us, this is really important, that our kids can see British values, culture, location and diverse representation on their screens.

“But we also need to balance that with making sure they have content that they want to consume and I think we are doing that, looking at our mix all the time, thinking of putting in as much of the more wholesome subjects, but also mixing those with fun and entertainment.”

Since taking on her role, Hidalgo says she has pushed to increase animation in particular. “We haven’t really invested in animation as much as we could have, it’s a bigger risk and it has longer lead times, so maybe that was the reason. In the past, there probably was a notion that animation couldn’t reflect kids’ lives, but I think it’s moved in different ways and has really developed – now animation really can reflect children’s lives in so many ways.”

Sarah Muller, head of commissioning & acquisitions for 7-12’s, adds that issues such as sustainability, diversity and inclusion are now “really embedded” in the BBC’s kids operations, “rather than us thinking it’s rather a nice thing to do.” She says that shows being targeted for her age group need to be “popular, big and to feel aspirational and to have ambition.”

Muller points to *Mallory Towers* as an example of a show that combines both ambition and “a very British story”, while animation is a key area for 7-12’s, she says, pointing to *Ignite* as being a key development to uncovering new talent.

Alexi Wheeler, Netflix director of kids & family

The world’s biggest streamer used CMC to highlight its eagerness to get onboard kids projects early, whilst also highlighting the fact that its on-demand roots means more flexibility in the length of seasons.

“We’re an originals team, so we get involved really early on,” says



“We don’t always need massive orders, because in the on-demand space viewing habits are slightly different. Often seasons of 10s and 20s work really well for us.”

Alexi Wheeler, Netflix

Wheeler. “You can come and develop projects with us, you can come and develop something at a super early stage, and we’ll work with you on that.”

For Netflix, which unveiled UK show *Sharkdog* last year, rights can in some regards be flexible and Wheeler adds that it comes down – as ever – to each specific project. “It does really vary, depending on what people want to do with their content – if they’ve got other ideas, if they want to hold on to certain rights and do things with them such as consumer products for example.

“There is some flex in there, it really depends on their needs and how much money we’re putting in and how we balance that, but there are a ton of different ways of working with us.”

The streamer remains on the look-out for shows with “broad” appeal. “We’re looking at stuff from pre-school right up to 12-13, animated and live action. We’re playing around with formats a little bit some of the time, some times kids do want to see things in the shorter form.

“And we don’t always need massive orders of 52 x 11’s for example, because in the on-demand space viewing habits are slightly different. Often, seasons of 10s and 20s work really well for us and we find that kids will watch those and enjoy them.

“The aim is for this content to be timeless and high quality so they want to watch it again and again.”

Louise Bucknole, ViacomCBS Networks International UK & Ireland, VP kids programming

ViacomCBS’s UK and Ireland focus is mainly on the younger skewing Milkshake! strand on commercial broadcaster Channel 5 and the local version of kids stalwart Nickelodeon.

Its slate includes shows such as *Circle Square*, *Odo*, *Meet The Experts* and *Mimi’s World*, and Bucknole says both animation and live action are in demand.

“The live action we want to see has kids on screen and represents what’s important to them. Diversity on and off-screen is really

“We look for lovable characters that could carry globally, because we obviously have a network across Nick Jr as well, and also Noggin”

Louise Bucknole, ViacomCBS





Odo (above) airs on the younger-skewing Milkshake! strand, while Sky's *Clam Brain* (right) aims to help youngsters address the difficulties of the past year



important for all the content we have," she adds.

"Our slots are into 2023 now. We look for lovable characters that could carry globally, because we obviously have a network across Nick Jr as well, and also Noggin. We're looking for strong, addictive storytelling, we want that core theme and hook – heart and humour."

Milkshake! is training its focus on shows that make younger viewers feel attached, with 5-, 7- and 11-minute durations of interest.

Bucknole also wants shows from the regions, "because we want to work with the best creators across the UK". There is also a need for shows exploring STEM, literacy and maths, "always around understanding the world around kids, healthy lifestyles, but above all friendship and fun in everything we do."

Lucy Murphy, Sky UK & Ireland, head of kids content

Sky has been attempting to help children deal with the mental and physical ramifications of the 18 months, with shows such as *Clam Brain* emerging as a result.

"Obviously, this year has had such a big impact on kids daily lives so we've announced the launch and commission of a lot of new shows to support kids as they go through what has been an incredibly difficult time," says Murphy.

A second season of mindfulness series *Dreamflight* has also been greenlit, while the wider programming demands are focused on "premium shows for the entire demographic". The key for Sky, Murphy says, is to differentiate.

"Anyone thinking of pitching to us... we have drama, we have factual, we have music and everything in between really. The key thing for us is that it needs to complement and not compete with our



"[Content] needs to complement and not compete with our partner channels – so if your show looks like a Cartoon Network show, we won't commission it"

Lucy Murphy, Sky UK & Ireland

partner channels – so if your show looks like a Cartoon Network show, we won't commission it because we already have Cartoon Network on the service.

"Bring us shows that are going to make kids' lives, and their families, even better. We're open to everything."

Paul Mortimer, ITV content director for on-demand & acquisitions

Like most players, ad-supported ITV had a tumultuous 2020, but Mortimer is keen to highlight that his operation is now returning to commissioning following a hiatus, as the company dealt with the pandemic fall-out.

"Our commissioning spend is skewed towards live action, because that's where we can really get the kind of content that allows our audience to see themselves on screen."



Paul Mortimer, ITV

"There's no change really in terms of the remit, we are looking for live action and animation," he says of his wishlist.

"Our audience is 6-12 years of age, our commissioning spend is skewed towards live action primarily, because that's where we can really get the kind of content that allows our audience to see themselves on screen, which I think is really important. If you are a UK public service broadcaster, that is your primary obligation."

Mortimer also highlighted the range of ITV's younger viewers, adding that his audience is "more likely to be based outside of London in the regions and they're more likely to be working class." The aim is to look for stories and formats "that reflect their lives and also their aspirations," he says.

"In terms of tone, we have a position that is slightly left of CBBC, and then a bit of irreverence, a bit of comedy and energy are always key ingredients in the type of programming we are looking for across all genres." **TBI**

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Rewriting the AVOD narrative



Roku's move into originals earlier this year – via Quibi – signalled growing ambitions in AVOD, while extensions for several shows suggest the model is working. Richard Middleton explores what's next

Roku's deal to acquire a library of programming from defunct shortform streamer Quibi earlier this year pointed to an ambitious new strategy for one of the leading global AVOD players.

It wasn't even so much the deal itself, which saw a package of shows – ranging from Liam Hemsworth's *Dangerous Games* to *#FreeRayshawn* and *Punk'd* – heading to the service, but the fact that Roku would be using them to launch an 'original' brand of its own.

AVOD content had, in the main, been non-exclusive and lower cost, but the Quibi deal suggested that Roku

had confidence not just in this package of IP but was prepared to roll out an ongoing 'originals' branding that would likely mean further shows down the line.

Ambition fuelled by growth

Such confidence is perhaps not surprising, with the company enjoying surging growth over the past 18 months. Earlier this year, it revealed it had increased viewers – or monthly active users (MAUs) – by 35% in the first quarter of 2021 to reach a total of 53.6 million, while second quarter revenues were up 81%.

Die Hart was extended into a second season in June

It wasn't all positives, of course. Roku's new user accounts were down on expectations in the second quarter while the total number of hours streamed also dipped on the first three months of the year, something that has affected a number of AVOD players as viewers emerge from lockdown and cut back on consumption.

However, the wider AVOD story continues to point to a huge opportunity – there have been numerous rumours regarding potential suitors for Roku over the summer – but perhaps more importantly for producers, AVOD has become a seeding ground for originals.

“This growth is allowing us to be more creative in our content sourcing and a bit more expansive – not expensive – in doing some of the other things we want to do,” says Mirjam Laux, Roku's VP of international platform.

Laux, who was talking to TBI prior to Roku's Q2 figures, is clear that Roku has no intention of competing with the billions spent on content by the likes of Netflix or Amazon. However, she also subtly highlights the expanding ambitions of the company and The Roku Channel, its online network that has proven so successful in the US, Canada and the UK.

The Quibi deal was followed by the similarly savvy \$100m acquisition of home improvement brand *This Old House*, which saw the operator taking rights to 1,500 library episodes and the ability to offer the latest episode after its PBS debut.

Laux describes these acquisitions as “very creative, different deals” and admits there could be more, as long as there is the possibility of “cost-efficient content addition.” She adds that new genres are also being explored – indeed, the over-riding narrative seems to be that Roku is in an “experimentation” phase.

“It is too early to say that we have a five-year

“Normally we only buy the rights where we are active, but when something allows us to go global, we'll do that”

Mirjam Laux,
Roku



Roku acquired the *This Old House* brand for \$100m

exclusive content strategy, but we are testing and learning at the moment, which is a great opportunity to have.”

Rights & roll-outs

What this means for producers and rights holders differs depending on where you are. At present, Laux says Roku is “pretty flexible” when it comes to acquiring rights for shows going onto its Roku Channel – mainly because the service is only available in North America and the UK.

However, the company picked up global rights on the Quibi package and there seems little doubt that the surging viewership of the channel will prompt the company – which also manufactures devices – to expand The Roku Channel into more territories in the near future.

“Normally we only buy the rights where we are active – so that's the US, Canada and the UK – but when something is available that allows us to go global, and if that is possible [as with Quibi], then yes we'll do that. But that is not our normal remit.”

The emphasis on originals, however, is growing. *Die Hart* was extended into a second season in June, while a second run of *Dangerous Games* – minus Hemsworth but with *The Umbrella Academy*'s David Castañeda – was ordered in August.

Such focus on originals and The Roku Channel, which launched in 2017, is not to ignore the company's wider service, which provides aggregation potential and allows brands to launch their own channels.

But it is specifically Roku's channel service that is at the centre of attention, mainly because its uptake is growing at twice the rate of the overall platform, with the company revealing in May that it is being used by around 70 million people.

No surprise then that Laux is “open to opportunities” but she says the focus for now is on exploring how the recently acquired IP is working with viewers. She adds that there is “no commissioning strategy to share yet” but the recent numbers suggest the original play is working. The company has also added former Quibi execs Colin Davis and Brian Tannenbaum to its ranks, overseeing scripted and unscripted respectively.

They join others including the former NBCUniversal exec Rob Holmes, now VP of programming at Roku. He spoke after the *This Old House* deal, describing the “incremental content investments” as being “commensurate with the scale and growth of the Roku Channel.” If that's the case, expect more to come. **TBI**



Kids Hot Picks

The very best children's content heading to market




 Top Pick


Rugrats

Producer: Nickelodeon Animation Studio

Distributor: ViacomCBS Global Distribution Group

Broadcaster: Paramount+

Logline: Reboot of the classic '90s animated comedy updated for a new generation

Returning to our screens after 17 years, Nickelodeon's iconic animated comedy has been brought right up to date with a new CG-animation style that sets it apart but retains the familiar design and aesthetic of the original show.

Rugrats first debuted in 1991, running for nine seasons up until 2004, and a lot has changed in the three decades since toddlers Tommy, Chuckie, Angelica, Susie, and Phil and Lil cast a satirical eye on the world around them. Accordingly, the creators set out to reimagine the show for a whole new generation, explains Kate Boutilier, writer and executive producer on the series.

"We started by doing the math – figuring out what generation the adults fit into 30 years later," Boutilier tells TBI. "For Grandpa Lou, he was no longer part of the 'Greatest Generation' but a baby boomer. For the parents, they were now all millennials, much like the viewers who grew up with the series."

Those generational shifts informed the characters and how they interact with the world around them, explains

Boutilier, who adds that they also looked at bringing more diversity into the show, dropping any "lingering stereotypes" and updating other things like references to technology and modern-day parenting styles.

"What we didn't update were the core characteristics of each of the babies. Those are evergreen and, we hope, still relevant to kids today as they were 30 years ago," says Boutilier.

As with the original series, *Rugrats* will follow the pint-sized gang as they embark on a mix of adventures both big and small, always bringing their unique perspective on things.

"Big" in terms of fantasy adventures, which will take place anywhere from inside someone's brain to a genie's cave or outer space," shares Boutilier. "And 'small', as in things that are unique to *Rugrats*; looking at the world from a baby's point of view, the misinterpretation of ordinary events, their first time at something, and of course, thwarting the schemes concocted by Tommy's mischievous cousin and nemesis, Angelica."

The Very Small Creatures

Producer: Aardman Animations
Distributor: Aardman Animations
Broadcaster: Sky Kids (UK)
Logline: Tiny child-like creatures help very young viewers to learn about the world around them

Spinning out of Aardman’s *The Epic Adventures Of Morph*, this latest pre-school series from the UK animation house is aimed at 1- to 3-year-olds and follows five toddler-like creatures as they explore a child’s play area when nobody is around.

Each instalment of the 20 x 3-minute stop-frame animation series sees the Very Small Creatures find a toy that has been left out by a child and through play and discovery, they learn about their physical world, each other and themselves.

“Each episode is full of activities that toddlers recognise and love,” explains series director Lucy Izzard, who tells TBI the show is “set at Very Small Creature scale,



down low at floor level where children play. Splashing in and out of colourful puddles of paint, acrobating across a soft toy play park, running in and out of fluffy blanket tunnels, hide and seeking in fairly obvious locations, admiring and mimicking their funny reflections in shiny, reflective objects. With oodles of laughter to top it off.”

Izzard adds that the show is

focused on highlighting each little character’s personal, social and emotional development – reflecting the skills being acquired by the young audience.

“This feels like the focus of my children’s learning at this young age of 1- to 3-years-old, at nursery making friends and learning what it is to be a social being,” says Izzard.

“Growing self-confidence and self-awareness,

recognising emotions in others, understanding that we’re all different and what it means to be an empathetic, caring friend, as well as managing our own feelings and behaviours.

“I hope that by watching our Very Small Creatures interact on screen, the audience will have some positive role models to show them the best way to act whilst laughing in the process,” says the exec.

Jasmine & Jambo

Producer: Teidees
Distributor: Dandeloo
Broadcaster: N/A

Logline: Musical-focused series for young viewers with two very different characters learning life lessons and sharing their love of sound

Aimed at 3- to 7-year-olds, this 26 x 7-minute series from Barcelona-based Teidees follows the adventures of the titular Jasmine and Jambo, two friends who are very different in size and appearance, but nevertheless share a passion for music.

The duo live in the surreal world of Soundland, where music reigns and everything they do is related to it. As director Silvia Cortés tells TBI: “Their passion for music is the key to the series; it is what carries the

plot in each episode, and it also informs and shapes the emotions of the characters. All that interests them is music and the world of music. It forms part of them, their lives and their reason to be. The songs in each episode reflect what they’ve drawn and learned from music and their love for music.”

Aside from their shared affinity for music, Cortés reveals that Jasmine and Jambo are “two communicating vessels that constantly feed into and balance

one another. They comfort, understand and respect each other just as they are. That is all possible because they get a kick out of being so different, one from the other, and because they are both very emotional beings.

“Jambo resorts to his wisdom and experience to offer Jasmine

lessons about music and life in general, but sometimes it is Jasmine who provides him with the unexpected, spontaneous and simple lessons. But the biggest secret about their relationship is that there is nothing they enjoy more than playing music together.”



Theodosia

Producers: Cottonwood Media, in co-production with ZDF, ZDF Enterprises, HBO Max & Globo

Distributors: Federation Kids & Family, ZDF Enterprises

Broadcasters: ZDF (Germany), HBO Max (US) & Globoplay (Brazil)

Logline: Edwardian-era adventure, following bold teen Theo's battle against ancient evil and dark magic

Adapted from the books by New York Times best-selling author Robin L. LaFevers, this 26 x 30-minute live-action series centres around a smart 14-year-old named Theodosia Throckmorton (aka Theo), the daughter of two intrepid Egyptologists, excavating in the Valley of the Kings. When Theo and her younger brother, invention-mad Henry, stumble upon a hidden tomb and a mysterious artefact, Theo unlocks the power to see and perform true magic, discovering a whole new world of mystery as well as danger in the process.

David Michel, president & co-founder at Cottonwood Media, and producer on the show, tells TBI that this is a very different property compared to what is currently on offer for teens and tweens

at present. "Theodosia is a period adventure series with a lead character that is extremely current in her behaviour. This is what made these books so appealing to us," he says.

Based in her parent's home, the world-famous Museum of Legends and Antiquities in the heart of Edwardian London, Theo must do battle with ancient forces, dark magic and comic chaos, aided by Henry and her friends, as she sets out to save the world.

This setting gives the show a "very different, mysterious atmosphere," says Michel. "Ever since *Harry Potter*, and even before then, the 'classic London' backdrop has been a perfect setting for mystery and magic stories. There is also an escapist quality to it that is unlike any other."



Chase and CATCH

Producer: Saturday Animation Studio

Distributor: Cookbook Media

Broadcaster: N/A

Logline: Futuristic action-adventure inspired by shows and movies from the 1980s



This 13 x 22-minute show is the first original animated series out of Montreal-based Saturday Animation Studio, a Digital Dimension Entertainment Group (DDEG) company, and making its debut at this year's MIPJunior.

Aimed at boys aged 7+ and described as a "high-octane action comedy", the series is inspired by 1980s cartoons and follows teenager Kenzo Chase, who joins the futuristic Vivacity police force where he must learn to work as a team with his strait-laced, prototype robot partner CATCH.

DDEG's CCO Fred Faubert tells TBI that the show will lean in to its 1980s "nostalgia action show-feel" with a unique visual style, "vibrant energy, bold and iconic shapes, and colourful villain characters." He adds that music will also play an important role in "the 80's vibe", which Faubert says will remind parents of classic

titles from *Doogie Howser* and *Lethal Weapon* to *Batman* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*.

Saturday was founded with a mission to "bring back the magic of Saturday mornings" and DDEG's president & CEO Louis-Simon Menard says *Chase And CATCH* has the potential to become an "aspirational, fun and memorable family 'rendezvous' where kids and family will enjoy, meet and interact with our heroes and their adventures."

Menard enthuses: "With our stories and universes, we want to make every day Saturday. Remembering the magic of Saturday morning, when we crowded around the TV with our favourite bowls of cereal, wearing our superhero pajamas, ready to escape into new imaginary worlds. On Saturday mornings, we could be who we wanted to be - anything was possible." **TBI**



Last Word Marya Zarif

Giving voice to the ‘little migrants’

“While the themes of war and migration have arguably become over-mediatised, most of the coverage of these problems has tended to exclude the voices of the main people involved”

Forced to leave their war-torn country and beloved city of Aleppo, Dounia (“the world” in Arabic) and her grandparents set off in search of a new home. As she travels around the world in search of asylum, Dounia lives many great adventures. And when she encounters an obstacle that seems insurmountable, the wisdom of the ancient world comes to her rescue in the form of the seed of baraké (nigella seed), that secret magical ingredient that wards off evil, given by her grandmother.

What is home? What is a culture? What is more important, to have roots and grow like a tree, or wings to fly and explore the world? Why is there war, and why is it important to open our borders and our hearts to people escaping from difficult places in the world?

voices of the main people involved. With that in mind, it became necessary for me to reach out and open a window to these voices, and to make this series an agent for the respect of children’s right to their story and mediatic image.

Soon enough, Dounia, the six-year-old little girl and her dreamy Middle-Eastern eyes, big smile and deep dense hair appeared in my doodles. Swept across the world, as the uprooted child that she is, Dounia is far from being a victim. She is an empowering little magician who finds in herself the resources to overcome obstacles.

Thus, she embodies a whole lost generation of little migrants. She gives a voice and a face to these children and offers them a positive reference model that will help them overcome their traumas and position themselves differently, that is, as little hands that fully belong to the world, to which they have much to offer and share.

Out of respect for the peoples’ stories, it was important for me to tell a story that dug deeply into Syrian culture. Details of daily life, traditions around cooking, music, myth, legend and, quite importantly for Syrians, the language itself and its mosaic of images and historical references were all celebrated. The magic of the baraké seeds represent the roots of *Dounia*. Like the seeds, this magic finds its place in the smallest things, which remain no less ever so rich and marvellous. Ultimately, this is what will allow her to overcome life’s obstacles and move forward.

Paradoxically, the cultural specificity and the authenticity of *Dounia*’s universe are also a way to closer reach the hearts of viewers from all cultures alike. *Dounia* and her characters are meant to appear to young audiences as new members of the family, or friends they would like to have.

As a wise man once said, “The tragedy of the poor is that no one needs their friendship”. In a world divided between prosperous regions and countries in distress, the same goes for exile, the migrants, and foreigners in general.

In the end, if, after watching the show, children do feel a desire to meet and befriend Dounia, I think we would have achieved something. **TBI**



With *Dounia*, I wanted to raise important questions to start a conversation with children, while creating an initiatory tale that is universal, full of poetry, of magic and joy.

Since the start of events in Syria in 2011, I have observed how the subject was both over-publicized and very poorly understood. All of a sudden, the country of my childhood was nothing more than a name for desolation and destruction.

And while the themes of war and migration have arguably become over-mediatised, most of the coverage of these problems has tended to exclude the

Marya Zarif is the creator, writer and co-director of *Dounia*, a new animated special from Montreal’s Tobo Media, aimed at 6- to 9-year-olds and distributed by Dandeloo



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