**Culture Comms 2016 – Bonding with Broadcasters**

Chair – Sara Wajid

Panel

John Mullen; BBC Arts (JM)

Shirley Mann; Harvest Creative (SM)

Bill Hobbins; Sky Arts (BH)

Eleanor Garland; Woman’s Hour and Late Night Woman’s Hour (EG)

**What are you commissioning at the moment?**

* BH: We have a broad remit and try to appeal to any art lover. To do this we work with all kinds of institutions from popular music to classical art. We are interested in amazing people doing wonderful things in the arts, it doesn’t matter where they’re from they just need to be exceptional people at the top of their game. If you know of these people within your institution then we want to hear from you, preferably with exclusives.
* EG: We’re not interested in “woman does something” stories especially not the first woman to do something that men typically get recognised for doing. That isn’t what we’re about. We want relevant, current stories of women doing wonderful things and being the voice of knowledge on their subjects, preferably exclusives. Experience in broadcast isn’t as important as them being good speakers, in fact often don’t work with people who are over exposed as it doesn’t have that new element, so new voices are good as long as they know their stuff and can think on their feet.
* JM: our priority at the moment is building partnerships. We want to cover big moments in the arts and they often happen within institutions, so we want to have a partnership with those institutions. Newness is key, it needs not to have been covered extensively elsewhere. If it is a popular topic we’d need a new angle that hasn’t been covered before. If you have this get in touch and recommend a speaker. They don’t need to have lots of experience they just need to know their stuff.

**What makes a story pop?**

* SM: Passion! Push passionate people forward as they are the ones that can really sell whatever it is you’re promoting. This doesn’t just have to be curators, if you have passionate front of house staff, board members or stakeholders that really know what they’re talking about and are passionate about it put them forward too. People want to see real people. Also don’t forget to do your research on the programme, find out what they need and at what time of day. Know which slot you’re aiming for.

**How do partnerships actually happen?**

* JM: Sometimes we approach places that are looking at something of interest if we see them doing something we think will make a good programme, but we’re open to people approaching us and suggesting things. If you pitch something it needs to be broad scope so that it can work across TV, radio, on demand and online. Ambition gets people excited.
* BH: A big mistake that happens a lot when people try to work with us is that they invite us to an exhibition opening, this doesn’t work for us. Our content repeats so we won’t cover anything that will date quickly as we need to stay relevant. If you think your exhibition is a good fit, find us a different angle, maybe something on the back story or content. We also take a lot of commissions from production companies, so it’s worth forging relationships with them.

**What are your lead times?**

* EG: it’s vital to know what the lead time is for the place you’re pitching to. Just phone up the editor and ask them what it is if you’re not sure. We can turn things around quickly but ideally we like to plan about three weeks ahead and decisions are often made in our Monday morning planning meetings.
* SM: Pretty much all newsrooms and programmes have regular planning meetings. Find out when they are and contact a journalist or producer in the hour before. Everyone is expected to bring three ideas to this meeting and often people are scrambling around last minute to find something. If you get them at this time then it increases the likelihood of your story being brought up in the meeting.
* EG: We don’t have a specific way we cover the arts and culture, we mostly want passion and a strong link to women. No shoehorning eg. Photography exhibition that contains the work of two women. Never contact us for International Women’s Day as it shows a lack of understanding of what the programme is about, we cover these stories everyday not just once a year. Anything sent to us about this will just be ignored.

**What structural issues exist between yourselves and PRs? How can you better work together?**

* SM: Elevator pitches are key. We don’t have much time so get your story across in the first sentence. This works for both phone and email we want to know straight away what you’re pitching and why it’s right for us. It needs to end the sentence, “guess what…” If you’re pitching to TV visual elements are key so focus on pictures, for radio it’s sounds, not just voices but background sounds like footsteps. These things bring a story to life.
* JM: People not understanding that the purpose of the show isn’t just to promote whatever you’re doing. Obviously we want to do that but it’s unlikely to be the main theme of the programme. For partnerships to work it needs to be mutually beneficial and people need to understand this.

**Who are your audiences and why should people choose your programmes?**

* EG: Late Night Woman’s Hour came out of summer night roundtables we used to do on various topics, they stood out as something distinct. We felt we were lacking a programme where women were sat having a relaxed conversation about a particular topic. It does feed out of the daily programme, if something that we cover in that stands out as being suitable to cover on the Late Night show we’ll tease it out. The audience is different though Woman’s Hour has an average audience age of 54 but we’re targeting Late Night Woman’s Hour, especially the podcast version, at a younger more diverse audience. We’re always looking for something new to cover so even if we don’t use it straight away, or even at all, we will still often call up a potential speaker and chat to them because if they’re good we will keep them in mind for future related stories.
* BH: Sky Arts have a 50+ audience because it reflects the people who consume art and culture but we are working to expand our audiences, mostly through programmes on different music genres. Sky Arts is more about brand than ratings, we want to draw people in with a topic they’re interested in and then expose them to other things. We don’t have the capacity to reach every audience, so we often focus on the more established ones, we would like to cover a broader range but we can’t be too specific as we want to be all things to all art areas. Covering the best of each genre is how to reach a broad audience. SW – surely this approach to excellence is what replicates the norms and stops new approaches. Need to work harder and go against the grain. BH: excellence isn’t about notoriety, but being the right person who is great at what they do. It doesn’t matter who they are or how well known they are.
* JM: our audiences are similar to Sky Arts. We are pushing to be a bit riskier in order to reach new people. To do this we’re trying to programme more performance based things as we felt the existing formula of men wondering around galleries needed to be changed. We are looking for excellent people who are at the top of their field, they aren’t always easy to find so we need the help of people like you to find out about them

**Audience Questions**

**Can you talk about some of the things you do outside of London?**

* JM: we are increasingly covering things outside of London, but we’re less likely to hear about it so sometimes we need to be told. Covering a range of geographical areas is a core part of our remit.
* BH: we had a project called Amplify, where we introduced institutions across the country to production companies and they met to discuss ideas and make contacts in order to address this. We do look outside London, but we also need to be told what’s going on.
* JM: for us at the moment you’re pushing an open door, we want your content regardless of geographic location and are more than willing to work with smaller institutions.

**Can you offer some advice on how to find your way into the BBC and through the structures?**

* JM: Commissioning teams will be your first point of entry
* BH: working with production companies is also a good way in. They know what it takes to make a show, have the contacts and know exactly what we want to hear in a pitch. That’s why sometimes we will pick something up from them we’ve turned down from you, they know what we want to hear. It’s not a condition though, we do pick things up directly from PRs as well, but it can help. We can often put you in touch with production companies if you don’t know any
* JM: we’re becoming an independent production company, BBC Studios, so we’re soon going to be in the position of having to pitch programmes too.

**What are more beneficially personal relationship or relationships with the institution?**

* EG: We’re happy to work with new people if the story is good. Also happy to work with some we’ve worked with before. Most important thing is if the story will work.
* SM: Even if things fall through we will remember the people who go out of their way to help us, so we may well come to you again because we know you’re willing and cooperative. The relationship you build with someone doesn’t just go away when a programme is complete or falls through, we do remember you.

**How do we make it through the ranks?**

* BH: We only have seven commissioners, and only four of those do Sky Arts. You can contact me directly on X. I read all the emails I get and from those will filter out the ideas that won’t work for us. Those that I think will work I will either refer up to the Head of the channel or come back to you for more information. If you’re going through a production company try going in straight to the head of department.
* JM: there are only two of us so email me directly at [john.mullen@bbc.co.uk](mailto:john.mullen@bbc.co.uk). We’re currently working on our plans from March onwards so please get in touch.
* EG: you can contact me directly too on [Eleanor.garland@bbc.co.uk](mailto:Eleanor.garland@bbc.co.uk) each person on the team has their own specialism but we pass things on to each other if they sound interesting as we’re always looking for new content and speakers. We’re very busy though so it’s annoying when chased, we do read emails it just may not be straight away.
* BH: also don’t send a lot of information, just a top line paragraph. We want to be able to know what you’re pitching straight away and may not read a long email, it’s a waste of your time, make it short.
* SM: a useful tip is to find the formula for an organisation and then watch the credits of a programme you want to pitch to and pull the relevant names from there. Personal phone calls are also important and it helps to know the name of the person you want to speak to. If you can phone first then follow with a targeted email.

**Are you looking for younger audiences?**

* JM: yes, but 50+ are still our main audience as they are undeniably the core arts audience. Just have to keep trying new things to reach new audiences. Modes of media consumption are important, exploring new ways of delivery to reach new audiences.
* EG: yes, and we’ve found that by putting things out on different channels they often end up with a wider reach which is what we’re trying to do, along with increase our likability. That said we do still need to keep our core audience.
* SM: The most crucial thing to keep in mind is what you want people do after seeing something on TV, that’s your core message.