

CULTURE COMMS

DEMYSTIFYING BBC ARTS

Panel discussion - Director of BBC Arts, Jonty Claypole, Editor of Front Row, Philip Sellars, and Editor of the Culture Show and Artsnight Janet Lee, freelance arts writer and broadcaster, Roya Nikkhah. Chair: Roberta Doyle
Roberta began by summarizing BBC's Tony Hall's commitment to the arts last year, which stated that arts will take centre-stage across the BBC via:

- A new topical strand taking audiences to music and arts events across the UK;
- A new digital offering;
- Closer engagement with artists and institutions;
- More distinctive arts content across all the BBC's outlets;
- Stronger leadership for the arts.

"This is the strongest commitment to the arts we've made in a generation. We're the biggest arts broadcaster anywhere in the world – but our ambition is to be even better.

"I want BBC Arts – and BBC Music – to sit proudly alongside BBC News. The arts are for everyone – and, from now on, BBC Arts will be at the very heart of what we do. We'll be joining up arts on the BBC like never before – across television, radio and digital. And, we'll be working more closely with our country's great artists, performers and cultural institutions."

Jonty reiterated how artists/producers/creators are at the centre of the arts at the BBC

Roberta began the discussion by asking each of the panel members to spend a few minutes describing their role and what they look for when stories come through to them and the process by which they get picked:

Roya Nikkhah is a freelance journalist who works on print and broadcast at the BBC. She used to work at the Sunday Telegraph as the Arts Correspondent and found that the contacts she gained in that role have been incredibly useful as a freelancer. At the BBC she gets to work on a wide range of stories, from Chitty Chitty Bang Bang to a newly discovered Faberge egg. She explained how much harder it is to get a story onto the BBC news bulletin, in comparison to getting an art story printed in the ST.

Philip Sellars is editor of Front Row and The Film Programme to name a few. He began with some FR context: It gets 3 million listeners a week; other than the News it is the only other live programme between 6 and 10pm on BBC radio; it has been going since 1998. Philip has been editor there for a year and a half. Since he has been editor they have re-organised the production team so that now they have one Head of Planning (whose job it is to plan the content 6 weeks ahead), and then 6 producers who look after a specific art form each (music, art, film etc).

He states how within the BBC, Front Row is considered to be the 'Today Programme of the evening'. This is a huge challenge for an arts programme, as they need to be topical and up to speed with what is going on across the news so as to keep content relevant and current. An advantage that FR has over the news though is that they can try and see everything that lands in their inbox's (whether they can necessarily feature it is another matter).

Philip ends by stating how his perfect 'pitch' from an arts institution/organization, is a genuine exclusive which is topical and targeted.

Jonty Claypole starts by stating how he was concerned about the title of the panel discussion, saying that he did not think that the BBC needed 'demystifying'. However, he said that after consideration, he realised that they could do more to come across as more approachable.

He said that treating the BBC as a single entity is a mistake when considering who to go to with a story, as they deliver so many services. It is beneficial to be targeted when considering who to contact.

He then described what he considers to be the main priorities of BBC Arts:

- To increase participation in the arts
- To create new work
- Support the wider arts sector through partnerships

Janet Lee is the editor of Artsnight, a new arts programme that invites guest editors and presenters every week. These can be 'major players' within the arts, or up and comers. They rely heavily on PRs telling them what is going on in the sector, and have a forward planning team who read everything that comes through to them (all press releases/stories etc). The programme tend to focus on 'high' art, and of course quality, but are also interested in a wide range of stories so like to diversify their content.

Roberta asks **Roya** and **Janet** about the range of stories that they work on/with.

Roya discusses the story of the recently rediscovered Faberge egg as a good example. Big interest stories are the most likely ones to get coverage. She did say however that there is currently a big push for arts stories on the main BBC news bulletin (as opposed to the 'And finally...' segment. Unfortunately, her experience is that there are not many big art exclusives out there that have enough of a human interest/back story to make it onto the main bulletin.

Janet says that her programme is the opposite in that 'non-exclusive' stories are as much as interest to them as exclusives.

Roberta asks the panel what their top PR pet-peeves are (i.e. what do they wish PR's would not do)

Jonty hates it when press releases are pages long, he prefers them short and to the point. If you're not interested in a story after the second para, you're not going to be interested by the 5th! He also appreciates it when PR's consider whom they are sending the release to, those who have done their research and have targeted their mailing list to those who perhaps have an existing interest in the story.

Philip: 'Don't assume we're dim! If you send your release/story to one producer/editor of an arts programme, it will be added to the general planner for all to consider, so don't be tempted to send it to everyone if you don't hear back/are not considered by one programme. Saying that, the BBC are not adverse to a bit of repetition of a story amongst a few programmes, but generally speaking, producers like exclusives, or stories that can 'run'/have longevity, so they can keep revisiting it. He used the example of artefacts held in museum's collections (like the recent story of the Northampton museum selling their Egyptian Sekhemka statue); this is a story that can run, and is also topical/current.

Roberta asks the panel what they think we can be doing as an industry/sector to work together?

All panellists agreed that considering whether a story can be linked in with stories from other institutions/organisations, i.e. consider how it can be made 'bigger', how it will affect more people, how it will be of more interest to a wider public, e.g. A major figures birthday, a UK-wide arts festival etc.

Q&A

-Are arts really at the heart of the BBC?

Jonty: Absolutely; arts is the only area of BBC programming that has not had it's budget cut considerably in the past few years. Radio 2 is broadcasting more arts programmes than ever before, and BBC 2 are showing more arts in primetime slots.

-How can we get the arts into the main news bulletins?

All: To get the arts on the news *at all* is a great achievement, coming from those who work there! The only way of getting art/culture pieces into the main news is if they are incredibly/topical and relevant.

-Leading on from Philip's suggestion of not sending the same release multiple times, a delegate asked whether it was worth slightly amended her story to make it more targeted to various producers/programmes.

Philip: He would advise getting in touch early, with a really targeted story; then he will be able to 'claim' it as an arts programme and take it forward

-Why don't the BBC outsource/broadcast content from external production programmes?

All: All agreed that the reason was that it was too expensive, and the quality might not be up to the BBC's standards. Also, Philip stated (and all agreed) that the Front Row presenters like to 'own' their content, i.e. they like to see the play, the film, the exhibition.

-A delegate suggested that young people are not represented within BBC arts programming enough, and asked why, for example, programmes like Front Row don't have young presenters discussing stories that are relevant to them.

Jonty: The BBC is the only broadcasting platform that is creating bespoke programming for children (CBeebies etc) so young people are clearly important to the BBC. However, it *is* a challenge to deliver for young people due to cuts.