

TBI Television Business International

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How Rene Rechtman grew his firm to become a \$3bn kids behemoth
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Being Bluey
Lessons from the creator of Australia's favourite export
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Editor's note Richard Middleton

Ratings & acquisitions

How's this for a fact: more than 27 million people tuned in to watch coverage of Queen Elizabeth II's funeral in the UK last month.

And that was just those viewing linear channels.

Here's another number cruncher: content from *CoComelon* and *Blippi* purveyor Moonbug Entertainment reaches around 8.5 billion average views each month on YouTube alone.

Such numbers highlight the almost incomprehensible pull that content on a small – or large – screen can have on us, the viewer. It also underlines that the power of the moving image has never been so strong, nor so complex in the way that it is being consumed and delivered to us.

It is this evolving ecosystem that is driving the rapid change in our industry, as giant US studios and one-man indies look to prepare for the future. Mediums are merging like never before and competition for attention is soaring, so it is fitting that as MIPJUNIOR opens its doors in Cannes, TBI speaks to Moonbug's CEO Rene Rechtman 12 months on from his company's \$3bn acquisition (see page 8) to find out what's next.

We also explore how producers of kids live-action shows are competing in a world where demand for animation has soared (page 12) and take a trip Down Under to delve into how *Bluey* transformed from a 60-second minipilot being touted around Cannes into one of the superstars of the kids world, with an exclusive interview with creator Joe Brumm (page 16).

If you're looking to follow Brumm's lead, sneak a peek at our breakdown of what the major streamers are looking to buy on page 20. And for all those acquisition execs on the flip side, check out some brilliant new shows in our kids Hot Picks (page 26) – one might be the ratings hit you've been dreaming of...

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Zodiak Kids and Family Distribution





Diversity Deborah Williams

Green shoots

Deborah Williams shines a light on emerging developments that suggest disability representation is beginning to be taken seriously

They say imitation is the best form of flattery. If that's true, then I'm blushing at the moment. When I started at the Creative Diversity Network (CDN) there were lots of discussions about the need for change and the lack of basic representation for many protected characteristic groups in our industry.

But the one that I inherited that was not being talked about was disability. Disability was the poor diversity relation – nowhere near the front of the industry's conversation about inclusion on and off screen.

Roll forward six years and nine of the UK's major broadcasters and streamers are focused on improving the situation, working together with disabled-led groups and people working in TV, as part of TAP (The Access Project).

TAP's genesis can be traced back to 2017, when CDN started our Doubling Disability project, which provided a chance for our member organisations to focus much more clearly. Our Diamond data revealed the lowest levels of disabled representation were in off-screen roles, so we undertook research into the causes, and based on that, developed and implemented a programme of work.

In 2021 we published the first results, which showed some progress, albeit pretty minimal. Our analysis suggested that it would be 2028 before our target of doubling the number of disabled off-screen workers would be met and decades more before the ultimate goal of equal representation of disabled people compared to the UK's population would be reached. It led to some pretty frank conversations with disabled people in the industry and some of our allies.

That's when UHC (Underlying Health Condition)-celebrated writer Jack Thorne and Edinburgh TV Festival creative director Stewart Clarke came in. They grabbed hold of our data and went to town. By using it in his 2021

MacTaggart lecture, Jack shone a light on disability representation. Stewart threaded discussions about disability throughout the event, putting it centre stage. And CDN, the accessibility sponsor for that year, helped to deliver accessible on-demand and live events to make the festival much more inclusive.

It really felt that disability had arrived as an equal part of the diversity debate, alongside the more traditionally discussed issues of race and ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation.

Late in 2021, UHC approached us, and we became part of a small group of disabled-led organisations and people with a range of high-level careers, experience and expertise in the UK and North America – all determined to ensure that disability and change were part of the future of television.

This led to a report focused on the practical life of disabled people working in television, which made some recommendations that have been listened to.

This August, I returned to Edinburgh with CDN colleagues for the first time in three years to continue the diversity debate and reveal some of our latest data and analysis. The festival also saw the launch of TAP, which has been hailed as the biggest disabled moment in UK television. I'm a little cynical, but as I said at the start, imitation is the best form of flattery!

High-ups in the industry with clout, position, money and much to lose are taking responsibility and outlining what they feel is needed to make a real and lasting difference. That is what has so often been missing.

Whilst I can always be a little sceptical, as there have been so many short-lived initiatives in the past, I feel this time, it could work. And most importantly, it's an example of what I have often talked about: allyship in practice; data and evidence leading the way; and collaboration. Working together to make change for everyone and future proofing our industry. **TBI**

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

About Town

Taking flight

We might have left our sword and shield at home, but the TBI team were among those headed to Leicester Square in late August to stake a claim for the Iron Throne at the UK *House Of The Dragon* premiere.

Sky took over the central London location as fans queued for hours for a glimpse of the show's stars and creators treading the red carpet, with lead actors including Paddy Considine, Matt Smith, Milly Alcock, Emily Carey and Rhys Ifans all in attendance.

Watching HBO's epic *Game Of Thrones* prequel on the big screen was a rare opportunity to experience the full cinematic power of what a modern big-budget fantasy epic can deliver – and immediately made us wish we owned a



larger TV at home for watching the rest of the season.

House Of The Dragon already looks to have become a global watercooler show and it looks likely that plenty more seasons of battles, politics, intrigue and giant flying lizards are on their way.

The series kicked off its UK debut with a few words from showrunner Ryan Condal and the stars. But – and here's a *Thrones* deep cut – the last word must go to whoever decided to play 'The Rains of Castamere' to the audience while waiting for the presentation to begin: you certainly left more than one person in attendance fearing for their lives.

Warm embrace

With summer drawing to a close, the great and the good of the French content business – plus 250 buyers from 46 countries – landed in the seaside resort of Biarritz to make the most of the fast-departing warm weather as they checked out an array of local shows. The return of Les Rendez-Vous Unifrance – the first since the pandemic and the 28th overall – delivered not only on the programming front: a premiere of *The Kings' Favorite* took place at the Casino Theatre, while drinks from ARTE and StudioCanal, amongst others, provided time for much-needed hugs between execs hailing from as far afield as Australia and Japan.



Scottish debate



The UK's TV industry upped sticks to Scotland for its annual jaunt to the Edinburgh TV Festival in late August, where the future of format reboots and the vibrant – if eye-wateringly expensive – M&A market made for much conversation. Whisky, beers and wine lubricated lips for looser talk after hours, but it was the former BBC journalist Emily Maitlis's MacTaggart lecture that prompted a heated debate around impartiality that rumbled on for several weeks afterwards.

Swings & Roundabouts

25m Amazon's *The Lord Of The Rings: The Rings Of Power* started paying back some of its \$465m budget with 25 million global viewers on its first day



225% France's revised tax incentive scheme more than doubled international investment in local TV projects in 2021, bringing in €302m (\$306m)



6 Hulu is taking down *Gilead*, with a sixth and final instalment of its thought-provoking *The Handmaid's Tale*. A spin-off, *The Testaments*, is already in the works



67m Global streamers cut commissioning spend in the UK by the tune of £57m (\$67m) in 2021 – although local spending was up





Opinion Siobhan Crawford

Splendid Isolation?

TBI's resident format expert reflects on the UK industry's isolationist approach to formats and suggests ways to remedy the situation

MIPCOM is on the horizon – a slew of content is coming our way. In Europe, we will meet with broadcasters, prodcos, creatives and distributors.

At its core, the Cannes-based event is an inclusive market to acquire content. So after a truly isolationist Edinburgh TV Festival, I have to ask British broadcasters/streamers and prodcos: why attend MIPCOM if you only want to receive ideas/pitches from producers from the UK and UK prodcos only want to work on their own content rather than acquiring third-party IP?

This is all very taboo, I know.

And it goes broader than just one event, it is the modus operandi of the UK market that is unspoken. If you are part of a large prodco group then it might only be partially true as you will have a central team pushing you to acquire content outside your comfort zone every six months.

This is likely to cause offence, but if you take it as an eye-opener then perhaps some of you will dive into the huge opportunity that awaits at MIPCOM as you embrace European content. Cheaper than your R&D budget, tested in the heart of Europe and created with international in mind.

The British problem

At present, UK broadcasters and streamers do not know how to acquire formats if there is not a UK producer pitching it. This was actually said to me.

The UK is the only Western market that does not engage with the European market in the easy exchange of ideas and formats, preferring to develop their own and not wanting distributors or creatives from abroad to approach broadcasters and streamers without a UK producer in the middle. Let that settle in.

Translation – Europeans/foreigners have to give our formats for free, for a long duration of time plus a piece of the IP to a British prodco, to sell in the UK. And that is if we do find a UK producer who actually wants foreign IP; the UK market is saturated by producers who say they only want to develop their own IP. The broadcasters/streamers say it is because they only want to work with people they have a relationship with – witty banter and shared stories that

make a pitch more fun. Big question: why do the ideas matter less than the relationships when it comes to formats in the UK?

As a result there's a huge knowledge gap: UK producers don't know how to pitch their content into Europe because they never established the relationships. And Europeans make less effort to pitch into the UK, giving UK arms of the big groups the best access to international content.

How distribution works

A reminder; distributors and broadcasters, creators and prodcos have great ideas. They see international potential, create pitch materials and project it into every corner of the world to see who bites. The UK currently has some kind of invisible forcefield repelling all the content – very, very rarely does a European format fall from the sky and land on a prodco's plate (slightly less loved than their own developments).

In Europe, most public broadcasters, prodcos and distributors in the unscripted format space know of each other. It is a community. They talk directly and know of new commissions and developments. They know the difference between original content and derivatives. Broadcasters license content directly and then find their preferred producer. Prodcos from France pitch a format in the Netherlands and co-produce it alongside their chosen local prodco, while retaining the lead position. A German broadcaster acquires a format directly from a distributor at a European pitch, loving an idea from a sizzle without any need for the distributor to be an ex-colleague or, as stated in Edinburgh, a “fun person”.

The rub

We've had Megxit and Brexit but the scorn the UK is delivering to the European market is reversible when it comes to unscripted formats: just open your doors. Stop saying “you know where to find us, our door's open, these are the people to talk to”. Respect the community of creatives whose formats travel across Europe. Or perhaps we internationals need to stop seeing the UK as the pinnacle - a Dutch commission is an innovative thing, a Finnish commission is wonderful, a German commission is huge. **TBI**

Siobhan Crawford is a format consultant who has worked in the business for almost two decades at firms including DRG, Zodiak, Banijay and Primitives

EXCITING BOLD FORMATS



OPEN HOUSE:
THE GREAT SEX
EXPERIMENT



SEND NUDES:
BODY SOS



LOVE IN
THE FLESH



STITCH,
PLEASE!

Taking the rights path

Moonbug CEO Rene Rechtman tells Mark Layton about the firm's expanding ambitions following its \$3bn takeover by Candle Media and the rights strategy that lets them engage with kids on any platform

Having launched just four years ago, London and LA-based Moonbug Entertainment has established itself quickly – to the extent that its shows now claim 8.5 billion average monthly views on YouTube alone.

Led by CEO Rene Rechtman, a former Disney exec who co-founded the firm in 2018 alongside COO and WildBrain alum John Robson, its stated aim is nothing less than to become “the leading digital-first kids’ entertainment company in the world”.


It faces serious competition, of course, but with a portfolio now standing at 29 IPs in 32 languages, including *Little Baby Bum*, *My Magic Pet Morphle*, *Supa Strikas* and *Playtime With Twinkle*, the strategy seems to be working.

It was the savvy acquisition of kids IPs *CoComelon* and *Blippi* in 2020, however, that put Moonbug on the map, with *CoComelon* growing to become the second-most subscribed YouTube channel in the world, with more than 152 million subs and 4.3 billion average monthly views.

One of Moonbug’s greatest success stories, *CoComelon* now streams globally on Netflix, and is shown on a litany of local players worldwide, as well as its original YouTube home.

“One of the key reasons why we’ve been so successful in such short a time is the multi-platform approach that we are taking,” Rechtman tells TBI. “Very early on, we said we need to be where all the kids and families are – full stop.”

He explains: “The behaviour of the audience has changed forever, and we need to adapt to that – it’s silly not to – and that gave us the opportunity, because a lot of great IPs out there had limited exposure. They were behind local or regional paywalls where kids are not spending as much screen time as they used to.”

A close-up portrait of Rene Rechtman, CEO of Moonbug. He is a middle-aged man with a full, well-groomed beard and mustache, and is balding on top. He is wearing a dark blue, textured blazer over a dark blue t-shirt. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight, confident smile. The background is plain white.

“The power of owning your IP and controlling its destiny is how the money falls into your pocket in the end and not somebody else’s”



Hold on to your IP

Moonbug's strategy sounds straight-forward enough – seek out brands with “great awareness and engagement with kids” that have yet to become global hits, buy them and make sure to hold onto rights. Then distribute as widely as possible to build global franchises, with spin-off shows, L&M deals and all that entails.

“That’s one of the things I learned spending four years at Disney,” says Rechtman, “the power of owning your IP and controlling your IP’s destiny, because that’s how the money falls into your pocket in the end and not somebody else’s.”

Rechtman describes Moonbug’s approach as “a little bit of an upside-down” model. “We are financing our own shows, so therefore we can have that bold approach that our content needs to be on every platform where kids are engaging,” he says.

Highlighting again the importance of placing content across digital, streaming and linear, Rechtman says that in the US “it’s very clear that if you are on, let’s say YouTube and Netflix, you’re covering 90-something percent of your demographic group,” whereas outside the US where Netflix does not reach the audience to the same extent, “we need to be on several platforms locally.”

Rechtman suggests: “When content is popular and you have created a huge

CoComeleon has been one of Moonbug’s biggest success stories since the IP was acquired in 2020, with 142 million subscribers on its YouTube channel alone

audience already, you should definitely go for a multi-platform approach – you’d be crazy not to.

“I’m not saying if somebody goes and invests heavily in an original with you that you can have the same approach, because you have somebody who is financing it, but if you have the privilege to finance partly or fully your own shows, that’s the approach you should have.”

Seeking synergies

This is a strategy that certainly seems to be working for Moonbug, with the company receiving recognition and some solid backing last year when it was acquired by Kevin Mayer and Tom Staggs’ Blackstone Group-backed investment outfit, Candle Media, in a deal valued at \$3bn.

Rechtman says that the two companies share the same “thesis” of building franchises from existing IP, with Candle and Blackstone simply doing the same thing in a “broader space.”

For Moonbug, the deal means it is now able to chase its ambitions “faster and bolder” and pursue “the most interesting and potentially biggest IPs out there”. Rechtman notes that “with the deep pockets of Blackstone, there’s nothing we cannot do.”

The Moonbug boss adds that being able to speak with Mayer and Staggs on a daily basis is “phenomenal”. He adds: “I mean, we’re talking about two of the brains behind many years of success at Disney and acquisitions like Pixar, Marvel and Lucasfilm.

Oddbods (right) was acquired by Moonbug earlier this year, while *Blippi Wonders* (below) is an animated spin-off from existing live-action title *Blippi*

“Kevin was a big part of that and a big part of our business model is acquisitions, so having that day-to-day strategic interaction is just phenomenal.”

Joining the Candle stable also opens the doors to collaborations with sibling labels, such as Reese Witherspoon’s Hello Sunshine, which is developing a new children’s project with Moonbug that Rechtman says is still at an early stage, but will allow the firms to engage with families together.

Moonbug’s portfolio is expected to continue to expand over the next 12 months, with Rechtman revealing the firm is on the lookout for opportunities similar to its recent acquisitions of Singapore’s *Oddbods* prodco One Animation and Canadian YouTube network *Little Angel*.

“[We] hopefully will do a big acquisition or two – if we’re lucky both this year, at least one of them this year,” he says.

The firm also has its eye on shows “that historically have done really well but maybe have been sleeping or hidden away behind paywalls here and there, but which still have huge relevant libraries but less awareness with young kids.”

For now, Moonbug is mainly focused on creating and acquiring content for its target demographic of 0-8-year-olds, but Rechtman tells TBI that the firm is open to expanding its audience – so long as the right opportunity comes along.

“We are interested in a little bit older. It’s a slightly more difficult game, so if we do something it needs to be bold, it needs to be one of the top three IPs in the world, to have complete recognition both on awareness and affinity, from, let’s say 8–12-year-olds.

“But if we don’t find anything like that then we won’t really go into that area. It’s because that area is driven by trends, it’s driven by localised content much more than the younger demos – kids are taking their own decisions rather than parents being involved.”

Taking the shortest route

It’s a fascinating point, because while Rechtman’s company is making millions out of kids shows, parents are the gatekeepers. On top of that, the way that shows are being consumed and the types of series being watched evolve rapidly, so awareness and nimbleness are key.

“We are recruiting quite a lot of young people out of universities and creative schools all around the world,” he says. “We were showing our content to the last bunch of young people who came into us and one of them asked: ‘What are you doing in short form?’”

Rechtman shares his surprise: “We are the short form company, right? Our content is typically four minutes and everything under 11 minutes is considered short form. But no, in their world everything under one minute is short form – so that’s an interesting space to watch.”

He explains: “If you have young people who are soon to become parents talking about short form being 60 seconds or less, we have



to start thinking what can be done there, how can you tell stories to our audience?”

“Something is definitely happening there and it’s definitely driven by Instagram and TikTok in particular, which are two platforms our kids are not on yet – so that’s something that I’m very interested in.”

Looking further ahead, Rechtman predicts that children’s shows will be taken more seriously than they have been before. “Kid’s content for many years has been neglected, that’s why we have been so successful in such short time.”

He notes: “You don’t win big awards and Oscars and stuff like that with kids’ content – not the kind of kids content that kids want to watch, at least – so it’s kept a lot of very creative people and very innovative people away.”

However, as the gap between technology and kids content closes, Rechtman believes “a lot of talented people” will come back to it.

The exec adds that he is also interested in how younger children are increasingly spending more time playing video games, with Moonbug having now moved in this space too.

October sees the launch of *CoComelon: Play With JJ* on Nintendo Switch, which for Rechtman and his multi-platform thesis, represents a whole new avenue to interact “with as many kids and families as possible.” And a whole new place to build on those 8.5 billion monthly views. **TBI**

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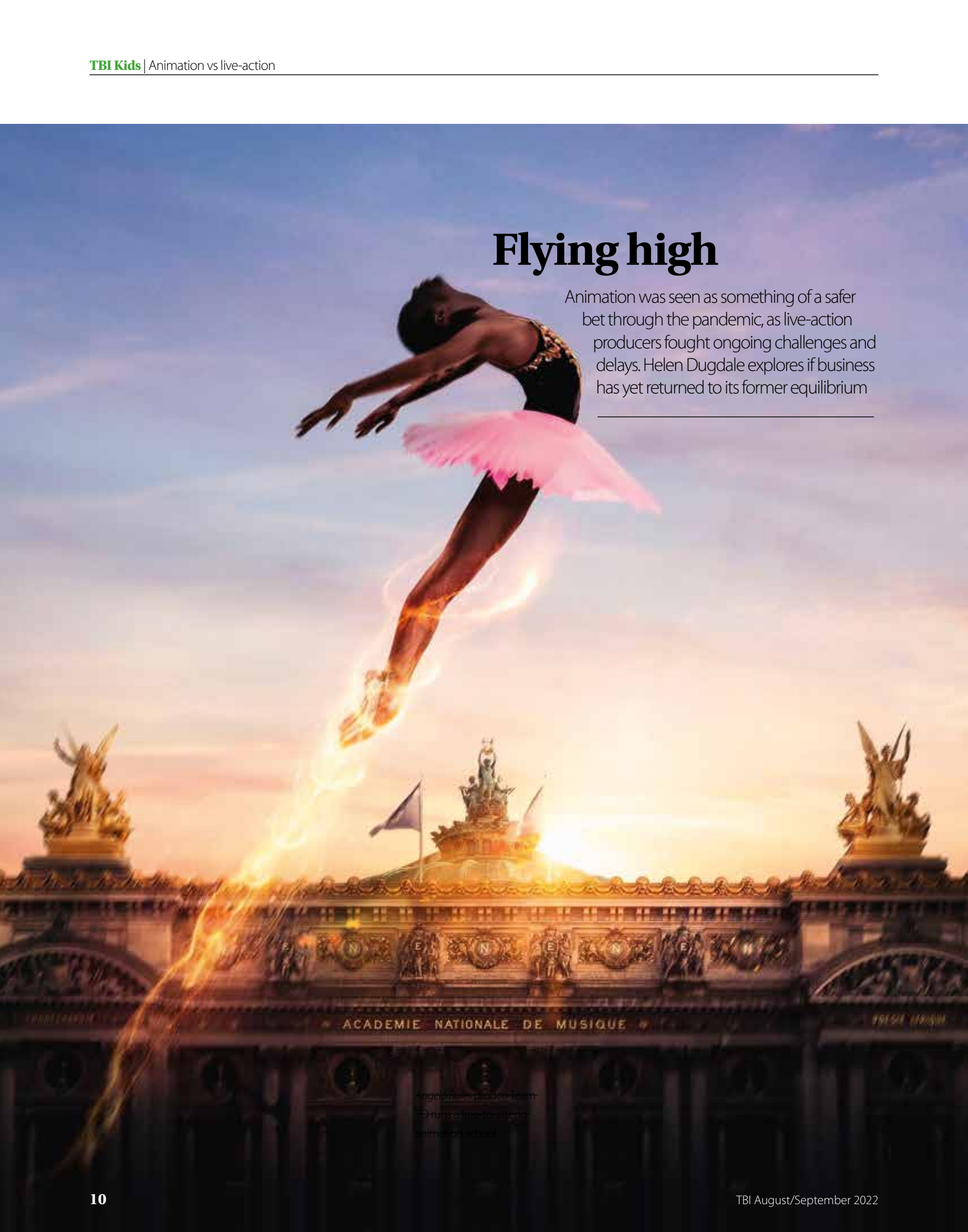


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Flying high

Animation was seen as something of a safer bet through the pandemic, as live-action producers fought ongoing challenges and delays. Helen Dugdale explores if business has yet returned to its former equilibrium



Angelina Jolie's production team
TD runs a free-to-air content
animation school

Rewind a couple of years and the world was in the grip of the Coronavirus pandemic. Broadcasters and streamers were adapting to a ‘new normal’, while producers were fighting on all fronts to keep their shows on track.

For those of a live-action persuasion, this was harder said than done, with protocols making physical production an even harder business than normal. Those working on animation, meanwhile, were able to adapt quicker – and while they faced considerable challenges of their own, this part of the industry saw a spike in demand.

Fast-forward to October 2022 and the question is how have those few years of hardship affected the kids business? Has that surge in demand for animation supercharged the sector with a flurry of new shows now coming to fruition? And how are live-action producers faring?

Evolution track

While animation production grew during the pandemic, the balance with live-action shows is returning simply because both genres tend to target different audiences.

“The sweet spot for kids’ animation is typically 4-9 years and live-action tends to skew older and complement the kids’ channels’ offering as their audiences grow out of animation,” says David Michel, co-founder & president at Paris-based Cottonwood Media, whose line up includes *Spellbound* and *Theodosia*.

“Both genres don’t compete in the same space for the same time slots, so they are usually complementary.”

For Bruno Zarka, president of distribution, syndication & features at Toonz Media Group India, it’s not a case of animation eating live-action’s lunch but rather the evolving nature of the kids business as a whole.

“Whether animation causes a declining interest in live action is not the way to see this, quality is the key,” he says. “The significant evolution from animation – notably for the teen audience – is the incredible rise in writing and animation quality.

“That brings a level of engagement and complexity into scripts comparable to live-action series in the same segment.”

The point around increasing quality of both animation and live action is also highlighted by Lionel Marty, MD at APC Kids France.

“Live action has always offered older kids a chance to project themselves onto the ‘real world’, to learn how to navigate it at the ages when they start being

“The incredible rise in writing and animation quality brings a level of engagement and complexity into scripts comparable to live-action series”

Bruno Zarka,
Toonz Media Group India



Spellbound (opposite) hails from Cottonwood Media, while *Birdo* is in development with *Flora* (below)

increasingly part of it,” he says.

“Whereas this would traditionally lead to a sitcom approach, the rise of high performing live-action series for adults has pulled kids’ live-action towards exploring more complex narratives.

“Similarly, animation used to be the realm of dream and imagination, offering less of an anchoring with reality, but it has also been evolving to appeal to older kids, getting closer to ‘real-world’ themes through their animated takes on the sitcom genre, offering also more complex and serialised narratives.”

Live-action shows can also be more accessible – provided there’s no global pandemic – points out Paulo Muppet, who is executive producer at Sao Paulo-based animation studio Birdo.

“It is still hard to beat, especially on social media, because it’s so accessible for content creators – all you need is a smartphone,” he says. “Animated content in its traditional format takes a lot of time and effort, but tends to hold itself better for repeated views and stay relevant for a longer period of time.”

Balancing dreams & reality

There is also a noticeable difference in what animated shows and live-action series can offer viewers from the emotional perspective of kids, an area that has come to the fore in recent years.

Tom Beattie, MD at Tiger Aspect Kids & Family, which has been behind *Danny & Mick* for the UK’s CBBC, says live-action can “offer audiences more of an emotional connection seated in reality.”

He adds: “Animation generally has heightened worlds, free from the constraints of what is physically possible – and that is how you can get a square sponge living in a pineapple under the sea. There are examples of emotive animation, but generally, for kids, animation is comedy, action and adventure, in



short bursts of escapism,” continues Beattie.

Michel agrees, adding that the “real-life connection” is what opens the doors to this genre playing a key role during younger years.

“If there is a strong connection between characters and viewers, then it also means that relatable issues can be explored, which may educate or allow for some resolution in an individual’s life,” the Cottonwood chief adds.

For Muppet, animation is a natural fit for expanding content requirements. “Animation isn’t constrained by real-world limitations and lends itself well to exploring visually different stories, even when they happen in the real world.

“But the goal I think is to have a balanced diet of media consumption and animation will always play an important part in that.”

Line-ups & approach

For commissioners, live-action series certainly seem to be in demand as production rhythms return to normal.

“We’re looking for co-viewing and live-action shows that offer something for everyone,” says Katie Wilson, VP of channels & global acquisitions at WildBrain. “And we’re always on the hunt for the next big family comedy.”

Over at Apple TV+, meanwhile, Cottonwood Media is currently working alongside other production partners on *Circuit Breakers*.

The half-hour futuristic anthology series launches in November and tackles kid-relatable issues through a sci-fi lens, Cottonwood’s Michel explains. “But not everything is as it seems, and their curiosity leads to chaos.”

Cottonwood has also started filming tween series *Spellbound* – a co-pro with Opéra de Paris, Hulu,



Circuit Breakers (above) hails from Cottonwood Media, while Tiger Aspect Kids & Family’s *Danny & Mick* (below) is in post on its fifth season

ZDF, ZDF Studios and France Télévisions – while Beattie and the Tiger Aspect team are in post-production on the fifth season of comedy *Danny & Mick*.

“I pitch it as my ‘live-action animation series,’” he says, “as the episodes are 11 minutes in length, it has an animation SFX layer, pinpointed music scoring and an animated scripting sense.”

Beattie also revealed that his team are working on an animation with YouTube Originals Kids and Family. *Corpse Talk*, a comedy history chat show for the dead famous, is based on the comic books by Adam and Lisa Murphy.

“We have a lot of action happening on the development side of things,” adds Muppet, who has three original projects moving forward with different partners.

Flora is a “botanical comedy” picked up by Jetpack Distribution that is evolving to become an international co-production; *Bia And The Beats* is a pre-school show in development with Cartoonito Lat Am; and an unannounced project with Nick International is going to the testing stage.

The slates reflect the returning balance of live action and animation and, as per the Apple TV+ show, there is new potential offered by some streamers, which are looking for quality above all and are, seemingly, prepared to pay for it.

“Saying ‘I prefer animation to live-action and consider it a better fit’ is wrong,” says Zarka. “What is essential is to share true emotions and offer a journey to audiences with a dedicated palette serving stories and characters.” **TBI**



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A parent's best friend

Australian pre-school series *Bluey* has taken the world by storm over the past few years. Mark Layton talks to the show's creator, Joe Brumm, about what makes it such a co-viewing hit

Since its launch on ABC Kids in 2018, Australian pre-school animation *Bluey* has quickly struck a chord with children and parents alike around the world.

Produced by Ludo Studio in Brisbane, distributed by BBC Studios, and streaming far and wide thanks

to acquisition deals with outfits including Disney+, the comical day-to-day adventures of cattle dog family the Heelers – Bluey, her sister Bingo, dad Bandit and mum Chilli – are now watched in more than 60 countries.

The show's global success rests in no small part



Bluey has gained popularity as a show that parents enjoy to watch along with children

in that it has become a co-viewing hit, with each seven-minute episode dedicated to Bluey and Bingo's imaginative playtime – and their parents' spirited efforts to join in.

Show creator Joe Brumm remains modest about *Bluey*'s growing success and his role in it, telling TBI: "To be honest, I just write them to make me laugh, and what I think will make kids laugh. And for the most part it does.

"I think you laugh a lot when you've got a kid;

there's a lot of shared laughter in my house, so it just seemed natural to try to capture that in the show."

Digging into what has made the programme such a popular co-viewing experience, Brumm adds: "The world that is being shown on *Bluey* a lot of the time is the world of the kids' recreation, so it's easy to co-view because a kid enjoys watching another kid re-enact a library or a cafe – we rarely go to the places, we usually show it being re-enacted. And the parents enjoy seeing the little bits where they get it wrong, I guess the slightly bizarre nature of it."

Keeping it real

Brumm describes what happens on the show as "like 90%" based on experiences he has had raising his own children.

"The games are ones the kids have made-up, the sort of play that I observed my kids doing. At that age, between four and six, they're recreating the world around them but they miss out on so many details, so many small little things, so that it ends up a really bizarre world.

"That's what I loved – witnessing this bizarre version of our reality and I thought that would be quite fun both for kids and adults to animate. That's what a lot of adults get out of it and kids just love seeing other kids recreate the world, because that's what they do."

Emerging as a breakout character from the series is Bandit, Bluey's dad, who has grown into something of an international parenting icon for his (often begrudging) willingness to drop everything and join in with Bluey and Bingo's games.

Brumm describes the mounting reverence for his cartoon creation's parenting skills as "pretty weird" – understandable given the slightly autobiographical element of the series – but adds: "Bandit has got his faults. I like to think he's sharp, he gets a lot of shit for being perfect but he's always pretty tired, he doesn't play particularly willingly. I can't live up to Bandit; I'm probably more like Uncle Stripe instead. I played a lot with my kids, I was lucky enough to be working from home so I could do it and so that's just going to come out in Bandit."

But, Brumm adds: "If it gives a little bit of a guide to someone for how to play with a kid who might not be used to it, then I think that's a job well done."

Sticking to the rules

Establishing the right tone of the father-daughter relationship was one of the major factors in getting the show picked up, says Brumm, who reveals that

"If it gives a little bit of a guide to someone for how to play with a kid who might not be used to it, then I think that's a job well done"

Joe Brumm





Bluey is produced by the team at Brisbane's Ludo Studio

Bandit wasn't always such an attentive dad in his earliest iteration.

"Charlie [Aspinwall] and Daley [Pearson] from Ludo had a little mini pilot for a good year, taking it to MIPCOM and different places.

"The little one-minute short I'd made had Bandit pushing Bluey all the way around on a swing, while he's playing Fruit Ninja on his phone," explains Brumm. The short "stuck in people's memory," but they were unwilling to commit to a pre-school series where "Dad's on his phone and you're breaking all these rules."

After receiving funding from the ABC, a pilot was produced. "When we pitched it, it was pretty instant," reveals Brumm. "We had most of the distributors and broadcasters, ironically except for Disney, trying to bid for it."

Now that the tone has been set, Brumm wouldn't change it. While both Bluey and Bingo have both aged a year across the show's three seasons, don't expect to see them growing too much older.

"Bluey works best when it is kids of this age, 4 to 6. Above that, they start getting into a bit more abstract thought and it would become a different show. That age is about the recreation of the adult

world and that's where the richest stories are."

As for the future of the show itself, Brumm couldn't confirm if and when a fourth season might be coming but says that he has been working on some *Bluey* shorts – "just one-off things that couldn't quite spin out into full episodes."

The sincerest form of flattery

With its clear Australian setting and voice, *Bluey* would appear to be proof, if any were required, that children's shows can be region-specific and still sell well internationally, something it shares with the show that helped to inspire it – UK pre-school series *Peppa Pig*.

"I just looked at *Peppa Pig* as it was one of the top kids shows and one of my personal favourites and my kids loved it. I'd worked with those guys, I loved their sense of humour and I loved how English it was – I felt like I recognised the people I'd met in England on that show.

"I wanted to take that ethos but do a version for me - an Australian version where an Australian could watch it and go 'I work with that person or I know that person'. It's the vibe of *Peppa* that I wanted."

However, Brumm is sceptical that *Bluey*'s popularity represents any wider global trend towards localised content: "It's succeeded despite its localism, and I think *Peppa Pig* was the same. I appreciated *Peppa* for its localism, because I was living in England, but I think each of the shows has succeeded for different reasons.

"The main reasons are that it just tells a good story and it's funny. The 'Australian-ism' doesn't hinder it – that was my worry, that the accents wouldn't be understandable. Some people appreciate some of the little quirks, but it's not the 'Australian-isms' that have made it popular."

A well-told story

As well as *Peppa Pig*, Brumm's enthusiasm for other animation remains strongly focused on the UK. He shares that he has particularly enjoyed the adaptations of Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler stories, such as *The Highway Rat*, *The Gruffalo* and *Stick Man*, from UK-based Magic Light Pictures.

"They are very calm and they're very well directed. I find it fascinating that there's still a place for half-hour one off [stories] in animation. I don't understand the business model but I love that it still exists. I love the pace of those."

It's a place that feels all the more fragile in recent years, with current trends seeing young audiences turning increasingly towards platforms such as YouTube and short-form content for entertainment.

Brumm considers himself as "someone who likes telling stories with a beginning, a middle and an end", but argues that there is plenty of room for animation of all lengths and complexity. "Admittedly *Bluey* is only seven minutes long, you could argue that's quite short, but the shorter one minute 30-second-long clip type things, there's a place for that. It's so engaging, it's so easy and quick to watch – but I hope it never replaces watching a well-told story."

The future for kids' animation, especially



Bluey follows the imaginative play of children and the ways in which they can often misinterpret the adult world

considering the current demand from streamers, is bright on the whole, believes Brumm. "There's definitely some good quality shows coming out. Some of the stuff I see now is of quite a high visual quality.

"I don't watch it engaged enough to know what the scripts are like, but hopefully if *Bluey*'s done anything, it's shown that you can have a good co-viewing show for this age group. I hope to see more of that." **TBI**

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What the kids want

Mark Layton hears from Disney, Warner Bros. Discovery, Wildbrain and Viaplay kids chiefs about their content demands



Katie Wilson, VP of channels & global acquisitions, WildBrain Television

Covering WildBrain’s portfolio of Canadian broadcast channels – Family Channel, Family CHRGD, Family Jr., Télémagino and their multiplatform/

VOD extensions – Wilson is currently seeking

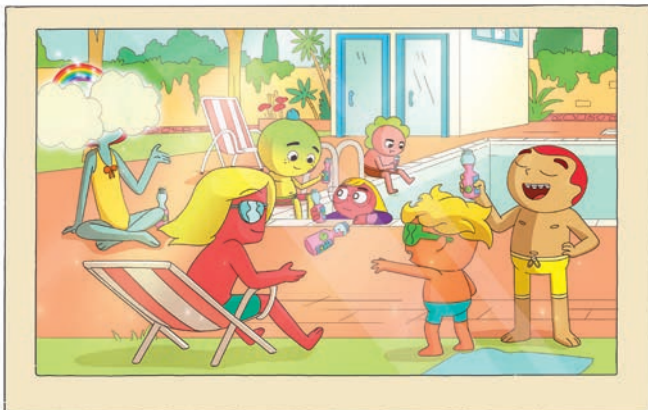
“engaging animation and live-action content that will work well in primetime slots.” Specifically, the hunt is on for “laugh-out-loud, animated comedies for the whole family.”

Wilson says that WildBrain is open to unsolicited pitches, but would encourage anyone who is looking to pitch to have “a solid understanding” of its audience and “what WildBrain is about” before submitting a project. She adds: “Pitches that are on-brand with the channel and align with our current content needs will stand out and tend to rise to the top of the pile.”

For an idea of shows that have been doing well for WildBrain lately, Wilson highlights CG-animation *Caillou*, which is currently rolling out a new series of specials, as well as animation aimed at younger audiences such as *Summer Memories* (pictured, below), *The Deep*, *Smurfs* and *Spirit Riding Free*.

Pre-school shows doing well for WildBrain include *Curious George*, *Mighty Mike*, *Grizzly And The Lemmings* and *LEGO Ninjago*, all of which are “key drivers” on Family Jr. channel.

When it comes to acquisitions, Wilson says that WildBrain is “always looking for partnerships and projects to enhance our roster. We have an extraordinary in-house development team, and we will be meeting with creators and producers at MIPCOM this year to bring more shows and partnership opportunities into the WildBrain world.”



Sean Henry, VP of content strategy & acquisitions, kids, Warner Bros. Discovery EMEA



The recently merged Warner Bros. Discovery’s primary focus for kids commissioning in EMEA right now is pre-school, with Henry telling TBI: “We’re open to pitches throughout the year, either in-person or remotely. We’re looking for pre-school series to be part of our growing global Cartoonito brand, and animated series targeting boys and girls aged 6+ for Cartoon Network. Both brands are distributed via our network channels and HBO Max.”

On Cartoonito, new originals would sit alongside upcoming pre-school shows like *Batwheels*, *Bugs Bunny Builders* and *Scooby Doo And the Mystery Pups*. Henry highlights returning titles such as *Teen Titans Go* and *The Heroic Quest Of The Valiant Prince Ivandoe* (pictured, above) as stand-outs on Cartoon Network.

On the acquisitions side, Henry is looking for “stories and characters that will complement our owned original IP on Cartoonito and Cartoon Network.” He explains: “It’s essential that our audience sees stories, characters and settings that are relatable, recognisable and aspirational, and that reflect the diversity of our region - that’s why we’re committed to investing in content from Europe, Middle East and Africa.”

WBD has “slots to fill” from 2025, Henry adds, with the ambition being to “build new, local IP over a number of seasons and years.”



Stephen Mowbray, head of series & kids, Viaplay Group



The Nordic group currently has “an extra eye open for animated series based on well-known brands and live-action comedies for seven-year-olds and up,” reveals Mowbray. “Our guiding light is characters with whom kids can identify,

preferably with an educational angle.”

The exec adds: “We’re always open to pitches and partnerships that can expand Viaplay’s content offering for younger viewers. It helps if there’s a script and pilot episode already in place, but it’s not essential.”

To get a sense of what’s in the works for the streamer right now, Mowbray highlights the latest kids’ Viaplay Original, *Karma & Jonar* (pictured, above), an eight-part fantasy series due to debut in autumn that combines a story and characters from a series of Swedish books with 3D animation technology from Viaplay Studios.

He adds: “In general, series for the youngest viewers are doing very well, especially when there is a range of characters where everyone can find someone to identify with. For the older kids, we see a positive viewing trend for comedy series, both animated and live action.”

When it comes to acquisitions, Mowbray says that Viaplay is focused on “strong and recognisable” brands. “We’ve often seen that a series that does very well in another territory can perform strongly in the Nordics, too. At the same time, we want to find an attractive balance between new shows and classics.

“In all cases, we want to offer a positive message to all kids, and exciting, fun and educational storylines. It’s even better if they’re enjoyable for the parents as well.”



Orion Ross, VP of original programming & animation, Disney EMEA

The Mouse House is on the look-out for shows that push the boundaries of what people expect a Disney show to look like.

Among the new original series announced by Ross coming out of EMEA this year is sports-themed epic adventure series *Dragon Striker* (pictured, below).

“*Dragon Striker* is our first foray into serialised anime-type content. It’s just not something that Disney is doing right now and we know that our audience loves it.

“We’ve seen serialised storytelling working for many years, obviously in Japan, and now finding new life on streaming,” explains Ross. “We’re now obviously thinking streaming-first and it really opens up this exciting opportunity to do serialised storytelling, to create rich and deep worlds and to have high volume multi-season arcs.”

Ross tells TBI that the appeal of the show is not necessarily its anime-style, but rather the complexity of plot and characterisation that comes with serialised storytelling. He also reveals he is looking to partner with EMEA prodcos on similar projects.

The Disney exec also adds that he is looking for animated comedies for 6- to 14-year-olds running to 11 or 22 minutes per episode that he hopes “might make people say: ‘I didn’t expect that to come from Disney’”.

He adds that grounded pre-school comedies based on family, school and relatable situations are also a priority. “We have a lot of great pre-school coming from the US, but we’re always looking at what we can bring from EMEA, or the rest of the world, that’s different.” **TBI**





Tech & Analysis Tim Westcott

Where's the real home of animation?

Omdia analyst Tim Westcott digs into the numbers to reveal just how big a role animated content plays in the overall offering of the major US streamers

Nobody can deny the rising importance of animation to global streaming services – particularly children’s content that can drive subscriber retention.

In fact, most of the leading US on-demand services offer animation, targeting either younger or adult viewers, but when it comes to the percentage of their catalogues devoted to animation, it is Disney+ that takes the overall crown.

The Mouse House streamer has far more of a focus on animation than its competitors, with the medium making up 35% of titles in the Disney+ catalogue in Q2 2022. This is substantially higher than the 12% for Netflix and HBO Max, while Peacock (10%), Paramount+ (6%) and Amazon (5%) lag further.

For most services, scripted drama and comedy are the key genres on SVOD. For Netflix, scripted represented 58% of its overall offer in Q2 2022, and 31% of Amazon’s SVOD offering. For animation leader Disney+ though, scripted represented just 30% of its offer, compared to the 35% total of its animation titles.

Putting percentages aside, however, and it is AVOD service Tubi that comes out in front in terms of volume, with 1,523 animation titles as of Q2 2022. Crunchyroll offered just under 1,400 anime titles.

Netflix was actually just ahead of Disney+ with 539 animation titles (a total that includes adult-focused shows as well as animation for children).

Tubi also came top in terms of theatrical animation titles, with 262, but Disney+ was not far behind with 227. Netflix had 77 animated movies, with Amazon offering 69.

An original idea

Those figures, however, cover all animation present on the streamers, rather than indicating how much animation is being originated for those services.

Apple TV+, which has the smallest catalogue of the major US SVOD services, actually has the highest proportion of original animation at 61% of its total animation offering.

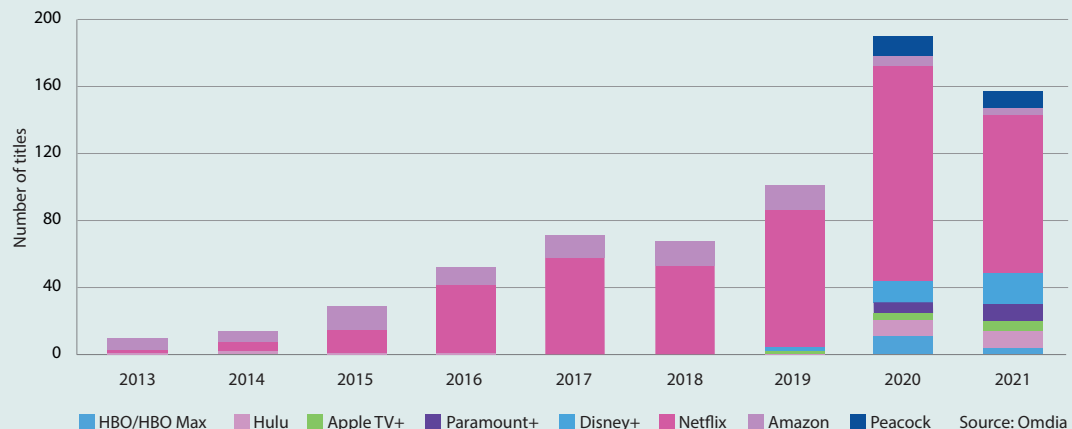
Tubi, as discussed above, has the largest animation offer in total, but none of its titles are original to the AVOD service, while Disney+’s original animation still only makes up 6% of its total.

Netflix, without a library to draw on, has a high level of origination at 46%, while for Amazon the share is less than 5%.

Since 2013, Netflix has originated far more animation than other SVOD platforms: a total of 489 titles, while Amazon started with several original series but is now well behind its main streaming rival.

Other players, like Disney+ and Paramount+, are able to bolster their offerings by drawing on massive libraries of existing film and TV titles. **TBI**

Original animation titles produced 2013-2021



Tim Westcott is senior principal analyst for digital content & channels at research powerhouse Omdia

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A renaissance in La Rochelle

France's scripted sector is enjoying surging growth, underlined by a vibrant Festival de La Rochelle last month. Marie-Agnès Bruneau reports on the key trends to emerge from the annual event

French drama is booming and the Festival de la Rochelle has clearly benefitted, with this year's event reporting a 20% rise in attendance to 2,600 professionals.

Such a gathering helped some key trends to emerge, notably the return of ambitious big budget costume dramas that celebrate women. Canal+ showcased its upcoming €27m (\$27m) budget *Marie-Antoinette*; TF1 had its new World War I miniseries *Les Combattantes* (aka *Women At War*); and France 2 screened the first episode of *Diane de Poitiers*, with French star Isabelle Adjani in person in La Rochelle.

"We are living in wonderful times for French drama, great narratives are back," said France Télévisions programming director Stéphane Sitbon-Gomez, as he unveiled the broadcaster's line-up. After a series of biopics on women including Brigitte Bardot, France Télévisions is now calling for projects focusing on the world of tomorrow and revealed a new appetite for sitcoms. It is also continuing its effort in digital-first young adult drama and revealed it will start a serialised series via its streaming service.

Across the board, broadcasters look to be pushing the limits to some degree. Arte's flagship drama was a dark edgy serial-killer miniseries, *Les Papillons Noirs* (*Black Butterflies*), which had one million digital viewers during the first few days ahead of its linear launch, while the broadcaster also brought its soft horror miniseries *Esprit d'Hiver*.

TF1, meanwhile, won the award for best hour-long episode series with *Lycée Toulouse-Lautrec*, about a group of disabled students, and OCS had half-hour comedy *Septième Ciel*, a love story between two older people. The flagship scripted series for M6, a more recent entrant to French drama, was *La Maison d'en Face*, adapted from Dutch show *Nieuwe Buren*, in which neighbours experiment with couple swapping.

Appetite for risk

Underlining the change in emphasis, M6's VP of content, Thomas Valentin, told the Grand Débat panel he was "ready to take risks," pointing to *Le Souffle Du Dragon*, a TV movie about breast cancer that made moved audiences to tears.

It wasn't, however, all about the broadcasters – streamers were highly visible, with Netflix premiering its Notre Dame fire miniseries *La Part Du Feu*, from Hervé Hadmar.

Amazon Prime Video had its flagship series, *Miskina, La Pauvre*, from comedian Melha Bedia, focusing on Franco-Algerian culture, but there is also a growing sense that streamers are becoming more woven into the French ecosystem. Some are partners on broadcasters' most ambitious dramas, with Netflix involved in TF1's



Axel Granberger and Alyzée Costes, stars of Arte drama miniseries *Les Papillons Noirs* were among the famous faces in attendance at this year's festival

Les Combattantes as well as in Arte's *Les Papillons Noirs* and in the channel's French hip-hop origin miniseries *Le Monde de Demain*. TF1's chairman & CEO Gilles Pélisson argued that "platform developments do not just mean one against another, it can also mean one with another for a higher quality drama."

Elsewhere, Netflix director of business and legal affairs, Damien Bernet, confirmed €200m (\$200m) would be invested in French productions, with 25 shows in the works, but admitted regret that the CNC grant mechanism is not yet fully available for producers working with streamers. Under new obligations, platforms need to dedicate two thirds of their French TV production obligations to independent work meaning they don't own the IP and have limited rights.

Partnerships were a running theme throughout the event, with international co-productions more important than ever for French public broadcasters. At the same time, French drama is travelling globally – with around 1,300 hours going global last year. More than 60 French dramas had international co-production partners, up from fewer than 50 over recent years, according to CNC figures.

That demand is generating some inflationary tensions, producers reported, while uncertainties around the future of public broadcaster funding is also causing concern.

There were also debates around falling linear audiences and a fond farewell to France 3's long running daily soap, *Plus Belle la Vie*, making its adieu in front of a very moved audience after 18 years. France Télévisions decided to drop the series, from TF1-owned Newen, after a ratings decline, although it was still slightly above average share for the channel. Another sign of changing times. **TBI**

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Kids Hot Picks

The latest kids shows heading to market





Top Pick

Super Sema

Producer: Kukua (Kenya/UK)

Distributor: Cake

Broadcaster: YouTube

Logline: A heroic 10-year-old and her brother protect their African village from an evil ruler and his robot army

UK-based distributor Cake recently picked up global distribution rights to this African animated kids' superhero series from London-Nairobi studio Kukua.

Exec produced by Lupita Nyong'o, (*12 Years A Slave*, *Black Panther*), *Super Sema* is written by Claudia Lloyd (*Charlie & Lola*, *Mr. Bean*) and follows the adventures of a brave and heroic 10-year-old girl, Sema, and her twin brother MB as they protect their African village from the villainous Tobor and his bungling robot army.

A heartless artificially intelligent ruler, Tobor meets his match in Sema, who learns that with determination, creativity and a helping hand from the amazing worlds of science and technology, almost anything is possible.

"They are constantly trying to thwart Tobor's evil plans, from battling his fossil-inspired robotic dinosaurs to saving an adorable baby elephant from his clutches," reveals Kukua CEO & founder Lucrezia Bisignani, of the siblings' adventures.

"But Sema and her brother are also 10-year-old kids at the end of the day, so many of their adventures are spent 'technovating' (that's our word for technological invention and

innovation) really cool virtual reality games, 3D printed pizza, the most amazing squishy slime, or a space walk for their grandpa Babu!"

The series has already garnered millions of views per episode on YouTube for its first season, while it also offers a strong STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and math) learning element, something that Bisignani says is reflected in Sema's approach to her superheros.

"She doesn't have supernatural gifts. If she needs to fly, she invents the world's coolest rocket boots. If she wants to change the weather, she technovates mixed reality goggles to bring snow to Africa or rallies the community to create a giant canopy to save their village from a heat wave."

Despite her epic adventures, Bisignani adds that Sema is also incredibly relatable to young audiences: "She may be super smart, but she's also a kid just like the audience watching along – a kid who expresses kid-sized joy, frustration, confidence, and even makes mistakes.

"Most importantly, though, Sema represents an audience from the African diaspora that deserves to see itself on-screen, and shows kids all around the globe that kid-power can change the world."

The Unstoppable Yellow Yeti

Producer: Zodiak Kids & Family France, Giggiebug Entertainment (Finland), co-developed with Disney EMEA

Distributor: Zodiak Kids & Family Distribution

Broadcaster: Disney Channel (EMEA), YLE (Finland), DR (Denmark), NRK (Norway) and SVT (Sweden)

Logline: Two 10-year-olds in a remote Arctic village befriend a chaotic yeti and head off on comedic adventures with a Nordic spin

Aimed at children aged 6+ and their families, this quirky animated comedy follows surfer boy Osmo who moves with his dad from the beach to live with their distant family in the quirky town of Winterton, where it snows all-year-round and monsters are strictly forbidden.

Osmo and his plucky cousin Rita form an unlikely friendship with a giant goofball yellow yeti called Gustav. Together, the fearless cousins help keep Gustav hidden from Rita's monster-loathing father, Mayor Chrome, while making offbeat adventures in their beautiful frozen home.

“Sitting below the Arctic Circle, forever covered in snow, and nestled next to Monster Mountain, there is so much to



explore in this unique part of the world, from frozen caves to monster graveyards, steaming springs and fields of rainbow snow,” reveals Gary Milne, head of content development at Banijay Kids & Family, which owns producer & distributor Zodiak Kids & Family.

“The trio’s adventures can arise from a human, or monster issue – like solving a mystery at a chainsaw ice sculpting

show, or kitten-sitting turning into a monster hunt. Just about anything can happen.”

Milne reveals that the show’s Finnish creators Giggiebug have “put their own spin on the universal stories of friendship, community and embracing difference.”

He adds: “We’ve worked with writers from many backgrounds, but every story has been filtered through a Nordic lens. *The Unstoppable Yellow Yeti* is inspired by the people, customs and traditions in Finland and the Nordics, to give it that unique feel, sense of place and off-kilter comedy, that will make it stand out in the market.”

As for the titular terror, Milne reveals: “Like his name suggests, Gustav the Yellow Yeti is an unstoppable force of fun and comedy. The series features a lot of slapstick silliness, but it is also full of heart, relatable characters and situations.”

Our Piggy

Producer: Bionaut (Czech Republic)

Distributor: Dandeloo

Broadcaster: N/A

Logline: A small and curious pig learns about the world around him, using his imagination to answer questions important to young viewers

This 2D animated series is created and based on the book by Jaromir Plachy about a curious pig who discovers the magic of ordinary objects and invites young viewers into his extraordinary world.

Piggy will embark on “small but huge adventures,” aimed at introducing children to “the magic of ordinary things”, says Emmanuèle Pétry Sirvin, producer & head of international at Dandeloo.

“Imagination is unlimited since *Our Piggy* uses daily objects to travel the world – over the ocean

in a truck on a dragon’s back. A bucket, for example, becomes a hat, a cardboard box becomes an elephant, another box a train and suddenly Piggy is an elephant trainer driver.

Just like the 2-4-year-olds it is aimed at, *Our Piggy* discovers and learns about the things around him, tackling such questions as is a washing machine more fun than a TV? And, what’s the best thing about getting a present?

“Kids will love the fact that Piggy is exactly like them (since the episodes are written

and based on true stories and experiences) but with total freedom since there are no adults or antagonists,” shares Sirvin.

“It is one of those rare and beautiful series’ and with non-dialogue, it allows for sounds to create strong and tender emotions,” she adds.

“The round and colourful design will appeal to an early

preschool audience in an original way. The difference between the daily situations and imaginative scenes are seamless which leads the viewer to jump into the creative world unknowingly.

“The charismatic simple stories and slow pace of each episode allows the youngest children to discover and learn about things that surround them.”



Interstellar Ella

Producer: Fabrique Fantastique (Belgium), Apartment 11 (Canada), Zeilt Productions (Luxembourg)

Distributor: Aardman

Broadcaster: VRT Ketnet TV (Belgium), Knowledge Kids, Société Radio-Canada, TFO, TVOKids (Canada)

Logline: Young hero Ella Ryder boldly goes where no eight-year-old has gone before in a series of exciting adventures of discovery



Set in the distant future of 3021, this CGI animated series takes place on a space station somewhere between Mars and Jupiter.

The show, which is aimed at 4-6-year-olds, follows eight-year-old Ella Ryder as she sets out with her friends on exciting adventures of discovery. And because they are in space, there is lots to experience and even more to explore.

“The show is packed with action, comedy and interstellar adventure as Ella and her friends discover amazing things about comets, planets and all the incredible stuff that makes up their home, the Milky Way Galaxy. Kids will also relate to Ella and her friends as she navigates common challenges for eight-year-olds; they’ll figure

out how to define and discover themselves as they follow her stories,” reveals Aardman’s head of acquisitions, Robin Gladman.

While Ella’s adventures are always fun, they are also emotionally charged too, allowing her to discover a little bit more about herself with each unexpected twist.

“Every episode has heart, adventure and science,” shares Gladman. “The writing teams put heart first because that comes from character and is why we care. Adventure is what makes us stay. And the science is what adds to the fun.

“The series tells compelling and engaging stories that instill the desire to look up at the sky and wonder what may be up there.”

Spellbound

Producer: Cottonwood Media, ZDF Studios, Opéra de Paris (France)

Distributor: Federation Kids & Family & ZDF Studios

Broadcaster: Hulu (US), ZDF (Germany), France Télévisions (France)

Logline: An American teenager must struggle with the dual demands of ballet and her emerging magical abilities after she enrolls at the Paris Opera Ballet School

This new live-action tween series shares a lot of the same DNA as Hulu teen dramedy *Find Me In Paris*, hailing from the same producers and showrunners, and similarly set in the Paris Opera Ballet School.

However, this new series trades time travel for witchcraft, and features an entirely new cast, following Cece Parker Jones, a 15-year-old who relocates from a small town in the US to France to study at the prestigious school.

Things soon turn upside down when she discovers a book of family spells, unknowingly casting the antidote to a protection charm

that has been hiding her identity since she was a little girl – and in doing so, summons her nemesis.

This spit-fire teen must now juggle the pressures of an elite ballet school and her emerging magical abilities.

“Things can take a turn at any time and Cece and her friends may find themselves running through magical broom closets all over Paris, or weeping during an extra-credit dance number due to some magical cookie batter,” shares Monica Levy, head of sales at Federation Kids & Family.

“Cece is a great dancer but she’s not Paris Opera-level trained. She has just found out



that she’s a witch and so are all the women in her family. While she gets a little help from magic to keep her in school, it becomes her main focus to become the best dancer at the school without any magical help at all.”

Levy names “the location, the high-end cinematic level of

production, and great stories” as highlights of the production and explains: “There are a lot of shows about witches and witchcraft, but we have the added element of exquisite dance, choreographed by some of the best choreographers around the world.”

Super Wish

Producer: Redknot (Canada)

Distributor: Nelvana

Broadcaster: YTV (Canada), Discovery Kids (LATAM), Discovery + (Brazil), Teletoon (French Canada), TVNZ (New Zealand), True Corp (Thailand)

Logline: A youngster and his friends embark on a journey through the magical Happy Land of Birthdays to undo a wish and return home

Ten-year-old Jesse Cameron receives a lesson in being careful what he wishes for that he will never forget, when he accidentally wishes his birthday party away.

Pulled, along with his friends, into The Happy Land of Birthdays, Jesse must now track down his ‘Super Wish’ and undo it so that he can get home. But that is going to be easier said than done as he travels from one birthday-themed world to another.

“As they search for Jesse’s Super Wish to take them home, they will need to navigate laser-tag caves, battle giant pizza-crust mech-bots, save ‘goodies’ from a giant Magician’s rabbit, play their way through magical boardgames, escape enchanted restaurants and more.

“Each episode features wild and zany fun-filled adventures, celebrating how awesome it is to be a kid, reveals Julia Dodge, director of global strategy & distribution at Nelvana.

“*Super Wish* is a ‘cake-way’ to fantasy, rooted in the universal theme of birthdays.

“Featuring strong character development and an immersive world, the series is unique in that it bridges kids to fantastical adventure while connecting them to a relatable cast of characters and the exhilarating familiarity of birthday traditions from around the world,” adds the exec.

Dodge says that *Super Wish* showcases a “unique and compelling world and artistic direction” thanks to art director Adrian Thatcher, who co-created the series alongside writer Vanessa Esteves.

Nelvana’s Dodge adds that she believes the imaginative series will prove a hit with kids due to its “humour, fantasy and escapism”.

She says: “Kids will find themselves immersed in an imaginative new world filled with wondrous yet relatable characters, each with their own hysterical origin story and a hero in their unique way.

“The series really does empower kids to celebrate their own awesomeness, and the joy of being a kid.”



Dodger

Producer: Universal International Studios

Distributor: NBCUniversal Global Distribution

Broadcaster: CBBC & BBC iPlayer (UK)

Logline: Adventures in Victorian England with the Artful Dodger, Fagin and his gang, based on the characters created by Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens’ iconic literary creations, the Artful Dodger and Fagin, duck and dive their way through the tough streets of Victorian London, with their gang of young thieves trying to keep one step ahead of the police in this live-action series.

From acting in a haunted theatre and sneaking into Madame Tussauds, to breaking into Buckingham Palace itself, Dodger always has a scam ready to cause mischief.

“*Dodger* brings to the screen something for everyone in the family to enjoy together,” says Mark Freeland, executive producer at Universal International Studios.

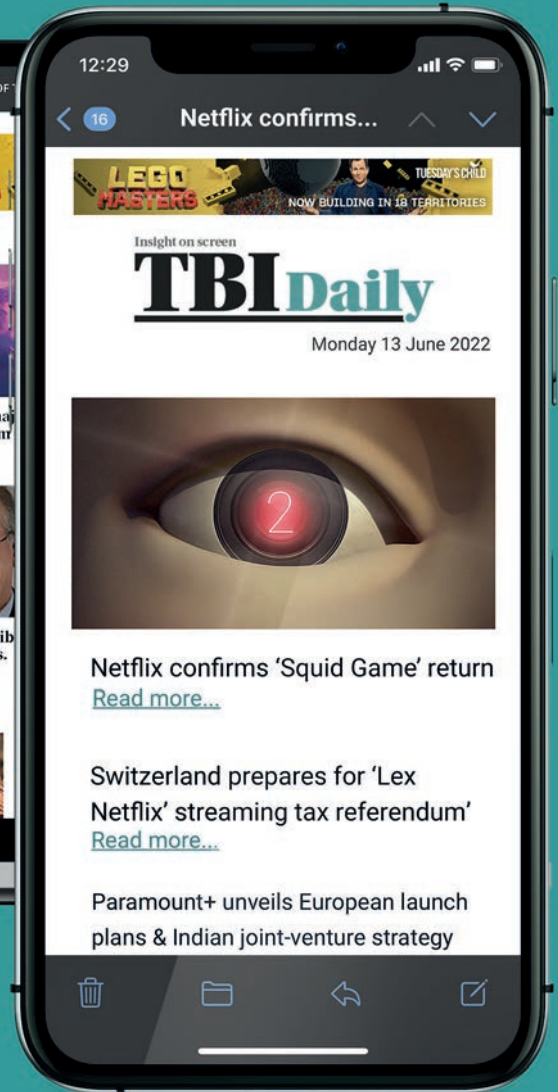
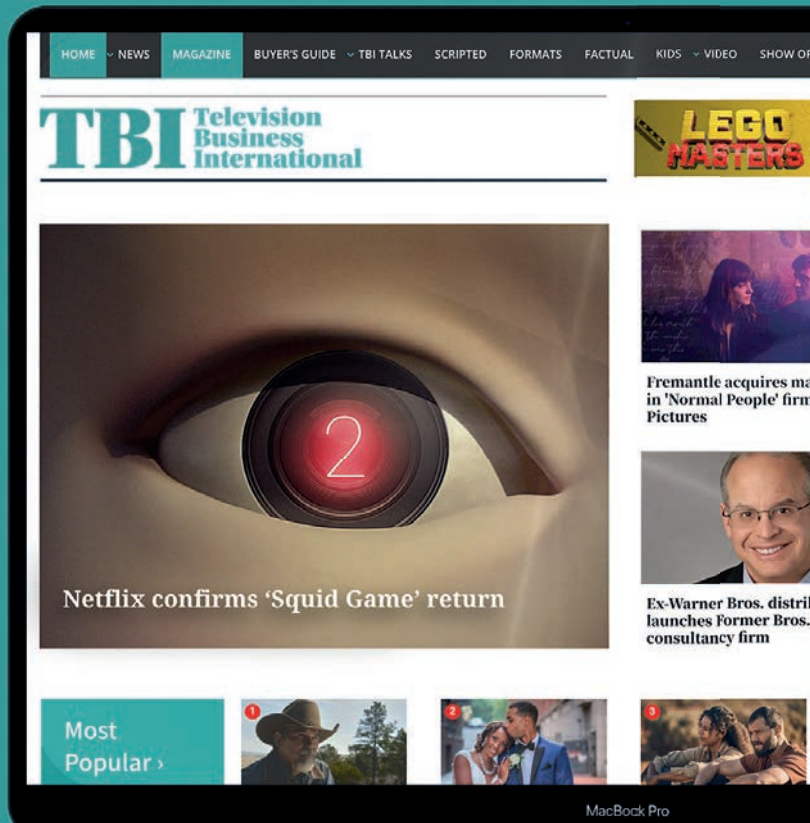
“To really encourage co-viewing, we also made sure

there were elements and humour for adults to enjoy too. There are very few genuine family dramas that appeal to such a wide mainstream, crossover audience as *Dodger* does,” adds Freeland.

“The series really encapsulates audiences into a fresh, contemporary and reimagined world of *Dodger*, keeping them on the edge of their seats.”

Dodger contains real jeopardy, which Freeland says reflects the Victorian time in which the show is set, though young viewers “stay safe in the knowledge their young heroes will always win in the end and return to a place of comfort and wish fulfilment – their warm, but dysfunctional ‘family’”. **TBI**

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Last Word Paul Robinson

A storytelling medium like no other

“If you ask a group of people in media what the Metaverse is, you’ll get different answers from each of them”

One of the highlights of my summer was being in the same room as friends and partners in the kid’s business to share and discuss ideas face-to-face at the Children’s Media Conference in Sheffield.

I’m sure that your working day, like mine over the past two years, has been back-to-back Zoom, Teams and Google Meets calls. We’ve learned how to use technology to continue working highly effectively. Indeed, in the global kid’s business it’s been possible to work more collaboratively, literally worldwide, even if early morning calls are made in pyjamas!

Yet whilst I value digital calls and tools such as Slack and Miro, there are some things that are more beneficial to do face-to-face. The age-old adage of “breaking bread with a customer” isn’t such a cliché, even though having a beer with a business colleague is probably closer to the mark.

So, when I read stories online about the Metaverse being a recipe to create a new generation unable to operate in the “real world,” such as with Neal Stephenson’s novel *Snow Crash*, a vision of a world dominated by computers in the desert, the ultimate nightmare, I struggle to believe that we are heading for this dystopian future.

The reality is that people need human contact in the real world. Kids are the same. They want to explore, learn and experience the world in ways that are logical for them and that means both online and in real life. Kids see the world through an “imaginative lens,” and technology can enhance and augment that for them.

If you ask a group of people in media what the Metaverse is, you’ll get different answers from each of them. That’s fine because it shouldn’t be some confining technological box, but an opportunity to be a powerful force for good. And it’s our job to create a safe and entertaining Metaverse experience for kids that we want and deserve, using technology as the enabler, not the driver.

In my opinion, we have a fantastic opportunity to create an experience that will help us connect as humans to each other and our planet via a storytelling medium like no other. The chance to

experience a concert by a favourite artist in your kitchen or be in the midst of a major sporting event at field or track level is very powerful. These are events or places that you may never go to otherwise. Consider too the therapeutic benefits to a patient who is recovering in the hospital and missing playing soccer. The Metaverse makes that a reality and think about the emotional benefits of such an experience to that patient’s recovery.

I said earlier that it’s up to us to decide what the Metaverse is. At Genius Brands International, that philosophy is central to our thinking and design of the Kartoon Channel! Kidaverse, which started it’s phased roll out as an SVOD service in North America earlier this year. Our goal is to create an exciting, special and unique place for kids that will stimulate their imaginations, engage, and entertain them.

Kidaverse includes all of the hit programs on Kartoon Channel! such as *Stan Lee’s Superhero*, *Kindergarten*, *Rainbow Rangers*, *Peppa Pig*, *PJ Masks*, *Minecraft*, *My Little Pony* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and will be the home for new, first-run and exclusive content, plus Genius Brands original productions such as the forthcoming *Shaq’s Garage*, starring Shaq O’Neal.

In addition to great content, the goal is to create a unique experience that kids can’t get elsewhere. So our metaversal content is exactly that and has been designed to enrich our audience in a totally safe environment whilst giving them a can’t get elsewhere entertainment experience.

In the Kidaverse you’ll find kid hosts that are guides, custom avatars, 3D content, gamified content, and in the pipeline are NFTs for kids, Messies (our own safe messaging), AR/VR content and Kidaverse branded VR goggles.

We believe that kids will have a wonderful time in the Kidaverse, but we also know they’ll want to go outside and kick a ball or ride on their bikes or go out for a family meal. I wish that the Kidaverse had been around when I was a child, but what I do know is that the “best of times,” whether kid or adult, is a balance of the real world and the digital world. **TBI**

Paul Robinson is president of Genius Brands International’s Kartoon Channel! Worldwide



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1 x 49 min

