

BG AGM REPORT TO MEMBERS - NOVEMBER 2017



Events

Making Crime Pay was our kick-off event for the year last November. Our panel of experienced producers and writers had a lively discussion about what makes good crime drama and we got a lot of complimentary feedback from members afterwards.

The Authors North Broadcasting Conference also went very well indeed with 72 delegates attending, all of whom have expressed interest in a follow up event, perhaps focusing this time on radio drama.

In May we hosted another successful, sell out panel session chaired by our CEO, NS and entitled *Drama or a Crisis? The use of non-fiction titles and writers in programming*. Speakers included Anthony Beevor, Max Rumney from PACT and two BBC lawyers. Key issues were discussed and as a result, NS has redrafted guidelines which we are hoping to be able to publish jointly with PACT at the end of the year.

The next planned event, on the ethics of exploitation in fact based drama and documentary, I'm hoping you will all be staying on for!

BBC negotiations, annual increments, fair dealing, compete and compare, quotas

Apart from the continuing challenge of holding up fee levels and trying to ensure fair dealing for writers, some issues of key importance to members have been raised during the year as part of the changes made to the BBC's operating and commissioning plans. As ever, our secretary Jo has been instrumental, along with our CEO, in fighting our corner and trying to hold the BBC account.

This time last year, the Radio Forum accepted the 1% rise offer for established writers and 2% rise for beginners after a bid for 2% across the board failed. The request for an extra .5% for moving rates rises from July to November was rejected by the BBC. We eventually agreed a trade-away of an extra £1 on the attendance fee rather than a flat offer of £4,000 to be given to writers' charities. We'd hoped to have finalized minimum fee negotiations by now, but the BBC are delaying while they finalise and sign off in-house staff terms. The current offer is a 1% rise contingent on agreeing extended podcast terms (from 30 days to 5 years) for selected dramas and new commissioned make.

Other specific issues raised and debated with the BBC this year include:

Diversity

Diversity has raised its head as a key issue in the context of various BG activities, including judging of the Imison Award last year, where it was noted that both numbers and diversity of entrants were significantly down. Although we had a deserving winner, and got some good coverage for James Fritz as the winner of both the Imison and Tinniswood, we felt that eight entries in total was worryingly low after fifteen years of 17-35 entries being the average. In addition there was only one female writer among the eight and no independent prod co entries that year.

The BBC were challenged on the above and insisted that they were holding up their commitments both to new writing and to diversity. However, they also confirmed that their much-criticized Project Diamond, which monitors diversity within the organization, does not cover radio programming.

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The good news is that Imison entries were back up to 29 this year, with 33 for the Tinniswood, so we'll be looking forward to some 'lively debates' on the Committee in December.

Commissioning/Compete and Compare

We continue to try to monitor and respond to the impacts on members of the BBC's 'compete and compare' approach to commissioning. The batch system for commissioning radio drama has been removed, with roughly 4 indies receiving the bulk of commissions and about 15% of Afternoon Drama slots reserved for smaller independents.

Ofcom has also removed quotas for radio comedy, drama and readings in their first Operating Licence (OL) for the BBC (previously there was a commitment to a minimum of 790 hours a year across BBC Radio 3 and 4) whilst introducing quotas for original children's TV content. We wrote a strong letter as the Radio Forum protesting the removal of radio drama quotas as did VLV and RIG who both urged for their reinstatement. Ofcom has not rowed back from this decision. The BBC has since published their Annual Plan committing to 600 hours of original content for BBCR4 and 25 new drama productions for R3 (including 2 hour stage adaptations). We will monitor output and formally complain to Ofcom if the BBC fail in their commitments.

Treatments without payment

We've had increasing numbers of complaints from members about the amount of unpaid work demanded of them during the development of treatments pre commission for radio dramas, including requests for sample pages of script as well as narrative breakdowns. Members should be aware that the RDA offers 10% of the Writer's Single Transmission Fee for the Script for treatments over 2 pages and often only 150 words are expected in order to gain a commission. This does not help writers who are yet to be formally commissioned, so we urge members to stand firm and ask for a treatment fee at the outset.

Contracting on a fast-fee basis

We have had instances where feature writers and contributors of poetry have been contracted on a fast-fee basis rather than Feature, Talks or RAC4 contracts. The Musician's Union report similar problems with the BBC and we will be focussing on this in the coming months.

Translator credits

We continue to raise the issue of translators not being credited by presenters, particularly on *Front Row* and *Open Book*. The BBC has undertaken to address this with the relevant producers, but the problem persists.

APC

As a member of the Alliance of the Protection of Copyright Nicola Solomon has been negotiating with fellow signatories on a new APC constitution and Code of Practice and these agreements will be agreed and signed before Christmas.

Member outreach, blogs and communications

Various members have contributed blogs or articles engaging with issues of relevance to BG members and we've had an encouraging rise in opens and click throughs for the BG newsletter. If you have an idea or want to contribute to a blog contact us.

Issues, activities and campaigning

We started the year with quite a lot of media attention being paid to the representation of sex and sexual violence on TV. I wrote a blog, prompted by the controversy triggered by the final series of BBC's *The Fall*, that suggested we needed an industry wide conversation about whether there should be more careful consideration of these matters for both actors' and audiences' sakes. Now we find ourselves discussing allegations of actual sexual harassment and sometimes violence in film and television, as well as at Westminster. I think we can probably all bear witness to the fact that these sorts of things are endemic in the broadcast and media industries.

Mentorship scheme

Although it's a Society-wide initiative, the BG committee and SoA staff members have been doing a lot of work this year to develop a fully-funded Society of Authors mentorship scheme for emerging talent, which we hope to launch in August next year. Promoting diversity, and campaigning for a broader mix of authorial voices in UK publishing and media (as well as raising awareness of SoA and outreach to under-represented groups of writers) has always been at the heart of the proposal for the scheme and it's been exciting putting it together over the year, and getting approval from MC, as well as support (financial and otherwise) from a variety of groups, organizations and individuals. Staff member Catherine Fuller has given over her mancom work to take on the role of scheme administrator and move the scheme forward with grant applications etc. so I'll look forward to reporting back on the launch at our next AGM!

Personnel

This year Mike Walker and Christopher William Hill will retire and we welcome members Sean Grundy and Hannah Silva onto the committee.

After years of unstinting work on behalf of the Group and support for broadcast writers, our secretary Jo McCrum is standing down at the end of the year to focus on other aspects of SoA work, and is being replaced by new staff member Theo Jones. The committee would like to thank Jo very much for everything she's done, and to welcome Theo as our new secretary.

The coming year

BG currently has 576 members and has grown in its remit during the past few years, but we feel there is much more scope to expand and embrace more initiatives to attract new members. We want to do more with the newsletters, as well as blogs and short interviews/Q&As with commissioners etc. We also want to grow our profile by campaigning on specific issues and increase our involvement with work on guidelines and building on our relationship with PACT. More fundamentally, we have begun discussions in committee about amending the constitution, and our name, so that the group covers scripted commissions in currently unrepresented sectors such as theatre. We also felt it was important that the group reflected the new platforms and formats for which writers are now being commissioned, such as animation and games. There will be further discussion of the proposed changes at the next BG meeting and an opportunity for members to have their say.