



Bringing It All Back Home

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Head of Programmes,
Northern Ireland

output of the BBC and a pride in the fact that their area has produced television that is being enjoyed right across the UK. More network production is encouraging a two-way traffic of talented people between Northern Ireland and London, building a sustainable and vibrant creative economy.

It was a big decision to come back. I had built for myself the kind of successful TV career that a lot of people can only dream of. I was travelling all over the world making high-prestige, big-budget landmark factual series. The productions I had been working on had indeed taken me all over the world, but I had a young family. It had been fun to take them along with me, and I told myself it was a wonderful experience for them – new places, new faces and new languages. But now they were reaching school age. We had just returned from a long stint in Montreal, where I had been filming *Superstorm*, and were back in London celebrating my daughter's fourth birthday. Someone asked her where she lived. There was a pause. My daughter looked across at me, with confusion on her face. 'Mummy, where do I live?'

That was the moment I decided they needed a proper home; solid ground, to know where they were going to be based. London is a great city when you are young, at the start of your career, but when you begin a family it isn't the ideal

Opposite: *Superstorm*

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place. Six months later, I had the job of Head of Programmes, BBC Northern Ireland, and the family were settled in Belfast.

Working here opened my eyes to something I had not previously fully understood: the importance of local television for local audiences. Northern Ireland audiences want to see programmes in which something of their lives and the places they come from is reflected on their screens. Their appreciation of programmes that speak to them in a unique and personal way is shown in the high audience figures such series attract. Last year, we produced a series called *Blueprint* about the history and geology of Northern Ireland. It had a big impact with a 34 per cent share, reaching a local audience of over 200,000 people. And some of our highest audience appreciation scores came from the three-part documentary series *Superdocs*, a compelling insight into the professional lives of Northern Ireland’s top heart, brain, breast and plastic surgeons.

Audiences in Northern Ireland have a strong sense of local identity and are not afraid of telling us directly what they think. If they like what we do, they pick up the phone and tell us. Equally, if they don’t like it, they are quick to let us know. We welcome the feedback. They genuinely feel a sense of ownership of BBC Northern Ireland – and this is something that programme makers in London are somewhat cocooned from.

These were locally made programmes, aimed at local viewers, and neither would have attracted the same high level of audience figures across the network. Yet they taught me two valuable lessons. First, they demonstrated the appetite for audiences to see their own lives and concerns on screen. Second, they revealed that there was a strong talent base making such programmes in Northern Ireland, which may have been local in content but were, within the obvious budgetary constraints, produced to standards as high as many network programmes.

If locally made local programmes are so successful, why branch out into network production? The answer is because we can, and should. Network series produced in the nations and regions give people an even greater sense of ownership in the output of the BBC, and a pride in the fact that their area has produced television that is being enjoyed right across the UK.

Recently the Sundance award-winning drama *Five Minutes of Heaven* starring James Nesbitt and Liam Neeson was filmed and produced in Northern Ireland. It explored some of the more complex aspects of Northern Ireland’s troubled past and the challenges the future holds in coming to terms with it.

During filming, passers-by watched fascinated to see two of our most celebrated actors performing together. James Nesbitt has regularly appeared in BBC Northern Ireland dramas and is well recognised for his role as the undercover cop in *Murphy’s Law*. He is to appear in *Occupation*, a drama set in Iraq where he plays the part of Sgt Mike Swift, one of three British soldiers whose lives we trace from the invasion of Basra in March 2003 to the present day.



Murphy’s Law

The fact that we can and have attracted such world-class acting talent and writers of the calibre of Guy Hibbert (*Five Minutes of Heaven*, *Omagh*) and Terry Cafolla (*Holy Cross*, *Best: His Mother’s Son*) instils in us all a great sense of pride in what we do. It is a way of connecting the people here to the rest of the BBC and to the rest of the UK.

So I see part of the responsibility of my job here as working alongside Northern Ireland programme makers to deliver

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more programmes to the network using the knowledge and experience they have in making local programmes. The BBC’s policy of moving production out of London will be a shot in the arm to local creative industries, and the talent that is here will undoubtedly benefit from a wider outlet for their work. Locally produced programming on its own does not sustain enough people, and it is vital for the nations and regions to be producing for network too.

More network production and more revenue streams are encouraging more two-way traffic between Belfast and London, bringing back some of the talented people who chose to leave Northern Ireland in the past because the main way to progress was to head for London. As more people are encouraged to join us here, it will build a sustainable and vibrant creative economy in Northern Ireland.

The current task is to identify where our strengths lie and how to spread the risks of growth. One key area of growth is in network current affairs production with BBC Northern Ireland increasing its supply of *Panorama* programmes.

Northern Ireland has targets in plenty of different genres – drama, current affairs, comedy, entertainment, daytime and

Opposite: Sigi Refsum is a leading breast surgeon at Belfast’s City Hospital (Superdocs)



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factual. For example, our comedy target could be delivered in a number of ways: a single, high-profile series or a number of lower-budget productions.

In terms of daytime output, one of our most high-profile local presenters, Stephen Nolan, has devised a show, *Panic Attack*. Plans are under way to migrate this to network. And we are already having a considerable amount of success in factual programming. I am currently executive producer on both *Atlantis*, exploring the real story behind the legend, and *Hominid*, examining times in prehistory when we almost became extinct because of competition with another species of human.

At the same time, there is a careful calculation to be made of what talent we need to help us grow fast, to be sure we have the right level of expertise. Already we have a commitment in-house to deliver a number of films for *The One Show*. To make sure we get it right, we have invited in some network colleagues to work alongside our local teams so they deliver exactly what the format requires – there is quite an art to producing the perfect *One Show* piece.

Five Minutes of Heaven



Eventually, though, the aim is to become self-sufficient, to grow and attract the right kind of programme makers, to build a solid and enduring network commissioning base and a vibrant place to work. ■

Ailsa Orr was born in Donegal. While studying for a post-graduate diploma at university in Belfast (after a degree in drama, film and TV in York), she began working as a runner at the drama department in BBC Northern Ireland. Her next job was with a local independent production company, Brian Waddell Productions, where she worked her way up the ladder from camera assistant to researcher, then assistant producer, before moving to London and joining independent company Wall to Wall, before rejoining the BBC there. ‘One of the things that’s stood me in good stead throughout my career is that I have never been afraid to jump backwards and forwards between the BBC and the independent sector. It’s given me a real appreciation of the skills within indies, and the sheer hard work they put in to developing ideas and winning commissions.’ Returning to the BBC, she was involved in the production of some of its biggest factual drama productions – *Walking With Dinosaurs*, *Pompeii*, *The Last Day*, *Supervolcano*, *Hannibal* and *Superstorm* – before moving back to Belfast to become Head of Programmes, Northern Ireland.

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