Radio 4 – listen carefully

HOW SHOULD you go about getting a commission for Radio 4? Explaining at March’s London Freelance Branch meeting how it’s done was Jo Coombs, creative director of Loftus Media. Her recent credits include Dads Who Do and D-Day: A Family Affair and she’s on the boards of the Radio Independents Group (RIG) and women in audio network Sound Women.

Radio 4 is changing, says Jo. Independents like Loftus do much of its content. These days the BBC “publishes” across many platforms, with radio just part of a package including photos, video clips or even cartoons and a “campaign” commissioned first, with radio as an add-on later.

Jo advises, “Listen”. Listen to Saturday Live’s four-minute slots, to You and Yours and much more.

While doing so, try to “work out how they did it... how did it work? And why did you like it?” Also read plenty of the short descriptions on the i-player pages of various Radio 4 programmes. The usually come from the wording of the original programme proposal.

The sort of programmes Radio 4 are seeking would include those that explain, such as its ten-part history of terrorism Terror Through Time, and those that ask, “Why?” – like the recent Putting Your Money Where Your Mouth Is, about a “guy who commits 20 per cent of money to charity, how much should we give? Why give to charity?” And Jo played a clip of A History of the N-Word, exactly the sort of “exceedingly provocative” content Radio 4 is looking for. Radio 4 are also “pushing for more women: they want more LGBT, more ethnic minority.”

An example of a successful Radio 4 proposal is Costa Del Flameenco, on a flamenco festival for people in prison across Spain. You should be able to hear a radio programme when it’s described. Send 200 words in, then they discuss it. It can take months before they come back to you, and then “sometimes you just get a ‘no’.”

Your first Radio 4 production will be “almost work experience.” A half-hour feature pays £6000 for an arts programme, and factual documentaries start at £7000. You’re not going to make a living on radio alone: you need a wider proposition, tweets, photos... you own the uncut material. The RIG can re-sell these uncut bits on, to Radio 5 Live for example.

Independent radio is growing, adds Jo. Penguin Books do their own audio guides. Universities want podcasts – packaging, not just publishing their audio from lectures. The South Bank Centre’s broadcast content needs packaging. The independents pay better, but you’re unlikely to get work with them unless “you’ve done the Beeb – that’s your calling card.”

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Will tax returns come back?

IN HIS pre-election Budget – what is the most important word in that phrase? – the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced “the end of the annual tax return”. So what does this mean for freelances?

We need to read the small print, of course. The document Making tax easier: The end of the tax return from HM Revenue and Customs specifies that “By early 2016 five million small businesses and ten million individuals will have access to their own digital tax account.” For most purposes, freelances are considered “small businesses”. The official estimate is that in 2014, 4.6 million people were self-employed – so it seems that it applies to us.

We will still have to keep receipts for business expenses we claim. At least, it is currently impossible to imagine any alternative.

It is also nearly impossible to imagine the end of penalties for late filing. They’re too important a source of revenue. Will there now in fact be more frequent deadlines? Indeed, the Daily Mirror reported that “buried in the Chancellor’s “simple tax” proposal are fines for late returns being replaced by a points system, under which late filers could end up paying £2000 for their late returns.”

The document says “small businesses will have the option to ‘pay as you go’ to help manage their cash flow”. We need to keep an eye on this. The temptation to force earlier payment will be strong – the effect would be to get 5 million people’s tax in six months early on average.

It’s now difficult to get clarification because civil servants are in “purdah”, forbidden from comment- ing in the formal electioneering period. But considering the proposal, it seems likely that it was, firstly, intended to generate misleading headlines and, secondly, to cover up an “oops” created when those who are supposed to pay higher-rate tax on salaries were suddenly required to fill out annual returns to check their new non-eligibility for Child Benefit. These people may be assumed to be supported by the Conservative Party to be its potential supporters. Oh, and those on low incomes claiming “Universal Credit” will have to complete something very much like a tax return every month. It can be assumed that these are not assumed...

The Independent reports that small businesses may not get “digital tax accounts” before 2020; even if the computer project doesn’t over-run.

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Press Barons and press freedom

RICHARD DESMOND banned Tom Bower, the author of a new biography of him as owner of the Express papers, celebrity magazines and “adult” TV channels, from entering the Express building to speak to the NUJ chapel.

Tom’s other books include the unauthorised biographies of media moguls Robert Maxwell, Tiny Rowland and Richard Branson. Tom will be heading a panel of speakers, chaired by NUJ general secretary Michelle Stanistreet, at the NUJ’s London headquarters to mark World Press Freedom Day. Other speakers are to be confirmed. The meeting is on Tuesday 5 May from 18.30 to 21.00 at NUJ HQ, Headland House, 308-312 Gray’s Inn Rd, London WC1X 8DP. To book, go to www.bit.ly/Barons2015

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