

Warner Bros Discovery – US

By Clive Whittingham 06/02/2023

Kathleen Finch at Warner Bros Discovery’s US networks is aiming to get commissioning back on the road after extensive cutbacks that followed the group’s mega-merger in 2022.



Kathleen Finch

Kathleen Finch, chairman and chief content officer at Warner Bros Discovery (WBD)’s US networks, made headlines last week when she said WBD hoped to “rear view mirror” a horrible 2022 and get back to business as usual in 2023.

The process of slamming together US factual giant Discovery, known for its suite of cablenets that Finch oversees, and WarnerMedia was a painful one in 2022.

A number of senior execs, including HGTV and Food Network head Jane Latman and Discovery and Turner networks head Nancy Daniels, were jettisoned. Factual execs spoke out about the chaos they faced trying to pitch shows to what had been one of their most prolific buyers of unscripted. A slew of shows were cancelled and library content ditched by streamer HBO Max to cut costs.

Finch insisted that this was “not how we do business” and was very much caused by the unique circumstances of a mega-merger. She appealed for producers to trust the networks with their best ideas, despite how they were treated last year, and said she would speak to any producer with concerns about working with WBD in the future.

Bringing the Discovery, Scripps and Turner cablenets together under one roof, with one commissioning team that was substantially slimmed down last year, has seen tariffs regimented across a huge swathe of US cable, but Finch has said producers shouldn’t be put off by relatively low figures.



Howard Lee

“Don’t let our perceived budget challenges cause you to decide whether or not to come in and pitch, because budgets are fungible,” Finch said. “Yes, there is a cost per hour we like to hit. Do we break that rule often? We do. Please don’t restrict yourself, come to us and let us talk to you about it.”

Across the company’s suite of US cablenets, Finch said 4,500 hours of content will be commissioned in 2023, although that divides very unevenly between the networks.

The flagship Discovery network is now under the control of Howard Lee, who was known for provocative titles and shows that exploded on social media while he was in charge of TLC, such as Dr Pimple Popper and, more recently, Milf Manor. He is now adding Discovery to his oversight following the departure of Daniels.

With that comes a doubling down on ‘men with beards’ reality content for the channel. Whether or not it’s what John Hendrick intended when he founded the network, Discovery is now very firmly a character-led network rather than a place to go for wildlife and documentaries.

“We wanted Howard at Discovery because what works best there is making heroes out of everymen,” Finch explained. “Fishermen, gold miners, sewer divers – interesting, real work, sweat equity that speaks to hero worship for a lot of people. Howard is good at finding an everyman and turning them into a TV star – that’s what Discovery does well and we want more.

“What we aren’t going to be doing is looking for the Discovery of old, which had a lot of animal docs and headier stuff. We love everyman hero shows, bigger-than-life characters doing rugged work.”



Milf Manor was given a provocative name deliberately

With that, Finch has renewed a plea we hear a lot from US commissioners but many producers doubt the veracity of, about not bringing glossy sizzle tapes and agent representation, but instead rough-and-ready footage of characters they've found out in the field.

"What works on our networks in unscripted is not somebody that William Morris brings us, it's somebody you guys find out in the middle of nowhere and shoot on a phone and send us the tape," Finch told producers.

"In success, these shows live forever; we'll make more and more, we'll spin them off. We work for the fans. If the fans love Naked & Afraid they'll love all the other iterations. Come to us first. We're not 'one and done,' we have brands that specialise in content genres and each of those brands needs 700 to 800 hours a year of fresh content. There are years when we make 400 episodes of House Hunters. In success, we're talking about hundreds of episodes."

A 15th season of Naked & Afraid launches on February 19.

It has been clear for some time that TLC is "not the learning channel anymore," Finch confirmed. "It's a fun network with a passionate fanbase – we embrace that fanbase and we love them."

Under Lee, loud and provocative concepts and titles have done well. "Milf Manor could have had a dozen other names but we knew it would be controversial and that's why we chose it," she said.



Naked & Afraid is set for its 15th season

The dating format, which premiered on January 15, sees older women head off to a tropical resort to find love with younger men, only to find their sons waiting there for them as the 'bait.' It steps away from TLC's fondness for follow-docs into the reality dating genre, but has garnered significant headlines and social traffic. "We love making a noise – everything with a bit of a wink and a nod," Finch said.

"We choose subjects that are loud, unusual and people living lifestyles that are not necessarily ours. Sister Wives follows the life of a family choosing to live differently. We tell the story respectfully and follow their lives. We want more like that. We will see what happens with MILF Manor; it's had huge ratings so far and done well on the streamer. We haven't done a lot of formats but we're excited because if it works we'll want more, and it seems like it is."

TLC is also known for spinning off its successful shows, such as 90 Day Fiancé, into multiple different versions – currently nine different ones in production in that franchise alone.

90 Day: Foody Call, an attempt to blend the franchise with a culinary format, was a disappointment, however. "The cooking show didn't work. We have Food Network. Other networks will dedicate nights to genres, we dedicate networks to genres, and it's a better way to grow an audience. If advertisers will pay a huge premium to advertise food products on Food Network we'll be putting our food content over there," Finch explained.

Turning to Food Network, now overseen by Betsy Sanner Ayala as head of content, Finch went out of her way to remind producers that its audience skews younger because of family co-viewing and can be “very picky.”

“It’s a huge audience, it’s a top-10 cable network and the audience is your friends who are into gourmet cooking – it’s an upscale young audience,” she said. “You might think it’s all fun and games but the food information in it is very sophisticated, and that’s not always the case on other networks where it might be more about celebrities and not what’s on the plate.”

“We’ve done focus groups on this and people feel they can watch the network guilt-free because they’re learning things there. The nuance that makes it a Food Network show is you have to learn a lot, it has to be sophisticated. It can’t just be ‘how to cook an egg,’ it has to be sophisticated ingredients and techniques. We don’t go heavy handed on it – that would be boring – but watch a Food Network show and listen. You will get a lot of nuggets of sophisticated stuff.”



TBS has brought back its remake of gameshow The Cube Finch admitted that “not a whole lot” of that 4,500 hours of original content will be going the way of TBS, TNT and TruTV, the networks that used to form part of the Turner Broadcasting System. What’s working there is sport from the NBA and MLB, and off-net sitcom repeats (principally The Big Bang Theory). Jason Sarlanis, in charge of content at true crime network ID, has seen his role expanded to oversee content for TNT, TBS and TruTV.

“The Turner strategy is in flux because what drives ratings is sports,” she said. “We do have unscripted content there but, quite honestly, I wouldn’t focus your attention there as much as the other nets. We do have an unscripted comedy show we’ll be launching on TBS. We also like sport-adjacent content and have a couple of reality series in the sport world.”

“Sport-adjacent doesn’t mean it has to be about sports, but that it will appeal to the sport audience. We’re doing a lot of testing for sweet spots. We have a lot of motoring shows on Discovery, and

robotics. We have tried them on the TNT schedule to see if we can get the sport audience to support another brand. Don't think about things that involve athletes, think about things that involve testosterone – guys watching shows with their sons.

“I didn't know much about wrestling before I did this job. I continue to learn a lot about the audience, and it's a fascinating audience – a lot of families, I was very surprised. It's a huge audience, we have wrestling on TNT and TBS and on both nights it kills, it absolutely kills. So finding something that speaks to that audience would be gold. Those shows can get one million – it's a huge for cable, so any show we can find that can build on that would be great.”

The networks' reliance on repeats will grow, with experiments continuing on what works and what doesn't from the Warner Bros library. This sort of relationship has already seen OWN take on Issa Rae's *Insecure* from HBO, and classic political drama *The West Wing* aired on HLN over Christmas. “We're dipping into that library to see what might work in the unscripted world,” Finch said.

TBS's local remake of gameshow format *The Cube* is back, along with its *Wipeout* reboot. But there'll be no more *Rat In The Kitchen*. “It's a great show but we have Food Network, so it doesn't make sense to spread the peanut butter that thin. We do a lot of competition shows on Food Network for a much better price point and in a way that enables them to repeat,” Finch said.