



Writers' Guild of Great Britain

Report to the General Assembly of the Fédération des Scénaristes d'Europe Brussels, 19-20 March 2011

This is a busy time for the Writers' Guild of Great Britain. We have been involved in important negotiations with broadcasters, political lobbying and campaigning in the UK and the EU, expansion of membership activity and development of leading-edge communications strategies.

New online payments system: Our most important activity in the past year has been the negotiation of updated collective agreements with the British Broadcasting Corporation to introduce a new system of payments to writers for the use of their work online.

The BBC operates a popular online catch-up service called iPlayer. Viewers can stream or download any programme without charge for seven days after transmission. Although the service is free to viewers, the BBC has to pay writers for this use of their material. When the new system comes into effect, some time in the next 12 months, the BBC will pay an annual lump sum to a new collective management company (Writers Digital Payments) operated jointly by the Writers' Guild and the trade organisation of writers' agents. WDP will calculate the amount to be paid to each writer and arrange the actual payments.

The BBC also plans to launch an online archive which should eventually offer all the radio and television programmes ever broadcast by the BBC (or those that survive). Some of this material will also be free to viewers, and the same WDP system will be used to pay writers.

Higher repeat fees: As part of these negotiations with the BBC the Guild has agreed to much improved payments for repeats on minority and children's channels. We are also discussing minimum terms for material commissioned for online, non-linear use and the new agreement will extend our coverage from scripted drama and comedy into animation and documentary programmes.

We expect that when WDP is up and running it will also become the vehicle for paying writers for the free-access online catch-up and archive services offered by other broadcasters such as ITV and Channel 4. At a later stage it is probable that it will handle payments to writers for the commercial online use of their work as well.

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10% increase: We have recently concluded successful negotiations with the main commercial broadcaster ITV, resulting in a 10% increase in all minimum fees – considerably above the rate of inflation – in return for concessions on repeat fees.

Film: The centre-right coalition government elected in 2010 has announced that the UK Film Council, formed 10 years ago to channel public funds into the UK film industry, is to be closed. It is one of many governmental organisations to be abolished and was probably doomed because of its high costs, including generous salaries and lavish expense accounts. Promotion of the UK film industry, including public investment and the oversight of tax breaks, will be transferred to the British Film Institute, formerly responsible for preservation, archiving and cultural aspects of UK film. The Writers' Guild does not oppose these changes because we found the UK Film Council largely ignored the role of the writer, while we have a good relationship with the BFI.

Public spending cuts: The government has embarked on a programme of extreme spending cuts aimed at slashing the UK's budget deficit. Among the consequences will be major cuts at the BBC and in the subsidised theatre, which will impact severely on Guild members. The UK trade union movement, including the Guild, is united in opposition to the scale and speed of the cuts and on 26 March 2011 we will be joining a march and rally in London – expected to be the largest public political demonstration since the anti-wear march of February 2003.

Copyright: The new government has launched a high-speed review of copyright legislation, with a view to relaxing the rules so that entrepreneurs can more easily launch new business models. There is danger of undermining creators' rights – already weak in the UK – and the Guild has joined with other creators' organisations in warning against such moves.

Europe: For the first time the Guild has started a sustained and focused programme of briefing and lobbying in Europe. We have met various Commission figures and MEPs to promote our views on copyright (particularly orphan works) and the regulation of collecting societies – we believe with considerable success.

Membership activities: Our annual awards, revived in 2007, go from strength to strength. The 2010 awards were our most successful for many years and we shall be moving to a bigger venue in 2011. We are putting more resources into regional organisation and now have active groups organising regular events in Wales, Scotland, Birmingham and Liverpool.

Communications: We have relaunched our website and we are making the maximum use of Twitter and Facebook. We have started producing our own podcasts, free via our own iTunes app and elsewhere, and about six are now available. Links: www.writersguild.org.uk; [@TheWritersGuild](https://twitter.com/TheWritersGuild); www.facebook.com/thewritersguild; itunes.apple.com/us/app/id378522349; writersguild.libsyn.com.

Membership: We have done a lot of work cleaning up our membership records. While this has resulted in a lower number of genuine members, at the same time we increased our income from subscriptions by more efficient collection. This work is continuing.

The year ahead: We will open negotiations for new collective agreements covering independent television and film producers.

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