Close-up on co-production

Tight budgets make co-production of factual programmes ever more attractive. And, as Andy Fry discovers, it is becoming an increasingly complex science.

INTERNATIONAL co-production has always been an important part of the factual financing landscape, because sharing the price of a programme is such an obvious thing to do. While an alliance of more than three broadcast partners is usually regarded as too many, a North America/Europe/Asia co-pro with a 10-20% contribution from a programme distributor invariably means big savings for all.

This is particularly true in high-end areas such as wildlife, history and science, where the cost of research, travel to exotic locations, time in the field, CGI and dramatic reconstructions can be prohibitive for any one company. But how has the co-production model been affected by recent changes in the broadcast market? Digital fragmentation, public-sector funding cuts and economic stagnation have had an impact.

For Japanese public broadcaster NHK, the co-production is an essential option. "International co-productions are very important for NHK," says Sayumi Horie, senior producer, international product development. "NHK is always looking for event programmes which will have new discoveries and a big impact. Our viewers expect NHK to offer grand-scale innovative series, and to satisfy them in the current budgetary environment, co-pro is essential."

Examples where co-pro is critical, Horie says, include Discover Science (NHK, NHK Educational and Al Jazeera Children's Channel); Life Force (NHK, NHNZ, France Televisions, Science Channel and Animal Planet) and Legends Of The Deep (NHK, NHK Enterprises and Discovery/Science Channel). The last title is, she says, "a big project now in..."
progress to film the giant squid. If the programme succeeds, it will be the world's first to capture the giant squid in its natural habitat.

With Life Force, another reason to co-produce was the need for high-quality multi-platform content. "Alongside the programme, we co-produced a website with France Televisions. On the website, viewers have access to over 500 photographs and information about biodiversity hotspots around the world in English, Japanese, and French," she says.

Independent factual producer/distributor Parthenon says NHK's desire for tentpole shows is shared by many broadcasters. "While the impact of audience fragmentation is there for all to see, that hasn't lessened the appetite for series and events that stand out from the competition," says Leona Connell, director of global factual sales and acquisitions. "For that reason, co-production is still often crucial."

One of the company's major shows at MIPTV will be Mystery Files, Season Two, a 13-part co-pro with ID Discovery in the US and National Geographic Channels International (NGCI). "Mystery Files uncovers secrets about famous figures from history," Connell says. Examples include Lawrence of Arabia, Sitting Bull, Marco Polo, Elizabeth I and Adolf Hitler — "the kind of universal subjects everyone knows, which makes them right for international co-pro."

Also on the MIPTV slate is Viking Wilderness, which is co-produced by NDR/Parthenon/NGCI. At 4 x 60 mins, this series offers a comprehensive view of the wild beauty of the Scandinavian north, Connell says. The fact that NGCI is involved in both is no accident, she adds, "because one of the ways to make co-pros as efficient and effective as possible is to develop some long-established partnerships."

Germany's ZDF Enterprises has also placed co-production at the heart of its factual activity, working with partners such as History Channel, Discovery, National Geographic and ARTE. "Current projects include Planet Egypt [ZDF, ARTE, History] and The History Of The Oceans [ZDF, ARTE, NGC — with NHK later acquiring the three-part series]," Kristina Hollstein, ZDFE's director of co-pro and development, documents. "Also at MIPTV is a six-part Secrets Of The Third Reich which we want partners for."

Like NHK's Horie, Hollstein says some projects simply wouldn't get off the ground without co-pros. But she warns against rushing into relationships at every opportunity: "It's a lot of work for both sides, so you need to make sure it is a win-win for everyone involved. For this reason, it makes sense to work with long-term partners with known editorial requirements."

While Hollstein retains faith in the co-production model, she says there have been changes which can make them harder to pull off. "One is the trend towards localisation. Even at the high end of factual, broadcasters work with increasingly want a presenter to give a series a local feel. But there are not many who travel internationally. So if you need to edit out a presenter or take your own presenter on location, it can add complexity and expense."

Hollstein is not the only one to make this point. But, given that the on-screen look is so in vogue these days, is there any alternative to recutting shows? "Sometimes that's all you can do," says Parthenon's head of factual, Richard Sattin. "But the presenters that travel best are those that are actively involved in the show. Examples might be Jamie Oliver or Bear Grylls, both of whom have unique skills that appeal to viewers."

Another issue affecting the co-pro model is the increasingly complex rights landscape, which sees partners wanting to hold on to more IP than ever. Consider, for example, the almost ubiquitous nature of the Discovery and History Channels, whose need for internationally cleared exclusive content must overlap repeatedly with the commercial model of distributors. "This can be a concern for a distributor like ZDFE, because our return depends on the sales we generate," Hollstein says. "So, if a partner says they want a specific right, they need to be very clear about why, so we can assess the impact on our sales."

This point is also picked up by Bo Stehmeier, director of sales at indie co-production specialist Off the Fence (OTF), which is based in Amsterdam. "Rights definition and the digital switch are a big issue, especially for co-productions where broadcasters operate in the same territories. The channels that get these co-productions jump-start naturally don't want their project to be seen on a competing platform in years to come. At the same time, producers (and distributors) are under pressure to have enough IP available to get a return on investment."

Despite such concerns, Stehmeier agrees that co-pro continues to be a vital tool in specialist factual areas.
with international subject matter. Current examples involving OTF include Stan Lee's Superhumans (8 x 60 mins; History US/OTF); Wildest Africa (13 x 60 mins; Discovery, ARTE, Oasis HD, Wind Dancer Films, Africa HD); Slaveship Mutiny (60 mins); WNET, ARTE, DTI — a South African fund providing 30% of qualifying productions) and Running With Wolves (60 mins; Smithsonian TV, ORF, NDR and Animal Planet International).

According to Stehmeier, budgetary pressures have a positive impact on the desire to do co-pro, though not necessarily the ability to do them properly: "There are a lot more projects looking for co-production partners. But, due to internal resource constraint on the channel side, there has been an increase on pre-sales with less editorial control, as many channels do not have the staff to fully oversee the delivery of their co-production investment."

According to Stehmeier, the benefits of co-pro diminish as budgets get lower. However, there are situations where co-pro is not just about sharing financial risk. "Projects that either have exclusive access or a fast turnaround also have a good chance of finding partners." Echoing Horie, he says: "It is important for channels to offer something exclusive and/or topical."

This is certainly a consideration for Daniela Bagliani, documentary acquisitions and co-productions manager of RTI SPA — Mediaset Group, the largest commercial broadcaster in Italy. When asked about co-production, she does not talk about the money. "There are two main reasons for us to co-produce a project: we want to secure the title or there is a strong Italian element in the story. Editorial control becomes really important only in the second scenario."

In other words, Bagliani enters co-productions, as opposed to pre-sales or tape sales, when she spots a game-changing project: "We don't do many co-productions and we are selective. We'd rather fund a restricted number of projects well than put small amounts here and there."

Recent examples include Life, a BBC-initiated project where Mediaset has "in association" status: "We are currently working at the same level with another big broadcaster/distributor for a 2012 show and are also involved as an 'in association' partner with Darlow Smithson on a 9/11 show. In terms of my second category, we are working on a co-production with Istituto Luce on Mussolini's Body. Here, we believe the importance of the subject for our audience meant it was right for us to be really involved."

Denmarks Radio head of documentaries and factual programming Mette Hoffman-Meyer also stresses the editorial dimension of co-pro. "I commission and acquire around 800 hours of factual content for a range of DR channels, ranging from major prime time series to one-off films. But for me, co-pro isn't just about the end result, it's about supporting talent in territories where producers need financial backing in order to tell compelling stories." Hoffman-Meyer says some of her most pioneering projects have come about as a result of backing talent in this way: "We don't really have to co-produce, because we have a good production pool in Denmark and access to quality international acquisitions. But co-pro has allowed us to collaborate with amazing production talent in China, India, Africa and the Middle East. When you co-produce with some of these territories, you get films with have an authenticity that has disappeared from parts of the business in more established TV markets."

For Hoffman-Meyer, this pursuit of new talent doesn't conflict with the necessary pursuit of audiences: "Some of our biggest risks — like Chinese film Please Vote For Me — have actually turned out to be our biggest successes."

That film was co-produced as part of the Why Democracy strand, which also involved producers from India, Japan, Pakistan, Liberia, Egypt, Denmark, Russia, Bolivia and the US. It was a huge international effort involving public broadcasters from around the world. Now, Hoffman-Meyer is involved in a follow-up called Why Poverty!, a series of films which explores ways to tackle the pervasive and corrosive influence of poverty. Due to be broadcast in late 2012, its aim is to reach 400 million viewers via the partners, which are: BBC (UK), DRTV (Denmark), YLE (Finland), VPRO (Netherlands), SVT (Sweden), NRK (Norway), ZDF/ARTE (Germany/France), ORF (Austria), NHK (Japan), SUN TV (Hong Kong), Taiwan Public TV, Futura (Brazil), SABC (South Africa), Al Arabiya (UAE).

As some of the above examples demonstrate, the combination of established expertise in Japan and emerging talent in China is making Asia-Pacific a compelling and exciting proposition for factual co-producers, both in terms of financial and editorial partnerships. OTF, in response, has established a base in Singapore, under Tony Chow. "We have been active in Singapore since 2007 and are in a
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seeking partners: Secrets Of The Third Reich (ZDFE)

TARGET 400 MILLION!

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Stehmeier also talks of "brands stepping up to the plate more, especially with topical/current co-production where the subject matter is in line with their brand aspiration and positioning." He has a warning for producers, though, which is not allow the appeal of co-pros to encourage unsustainable risk-taking: "For smaller production companies, managing the cash flow of a co-pro is an art form. More producers are looking for the best distribution deals to help with their cash shortfall and are coming to us with inflated sales forecasts from third-party distributors. [To avoid this] producers need to find distribution companies that have a vested interest in their projects."

Financing for new Co-Production

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Kristina Hollstein