

PARTNERSHIP POWER

Close-up on co-production



Partners In Crime (Singapore MDA)

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".



Hidden Cities (AAA Networks and the Singapore MDA)

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, ZDF's director of co-pro and development, documentaries. "Also at MIPTV is a six-partner *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 we 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-started 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

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Sayumi Horie

■■■ MIPDOC: FACTUAL CO-PRODUCTIONS

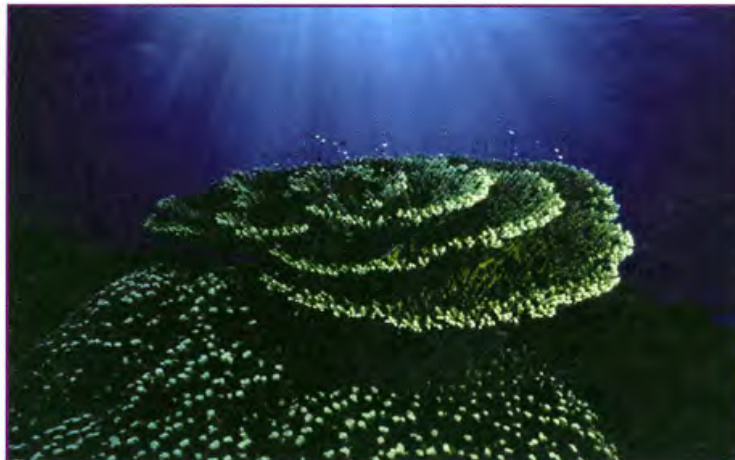
with international subject matter. Current examples involving OTF include Stan Lee's Superhumans (8 x 60 mins; History US/OTF); Wildest Africa (13 x 60 mins; Discovery, ARTE, Oasis HD, Wind Dancer Films, Africa HD); Slaveship Mutiny (60 mins); WNET, ARTE, DTI — a South African fund providing 30% of qualifying productions) and Running With Wolves (60mins; 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

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Leona Connell



The History Of The Oceans (ZDF, ARTE, NGC)



Life Force (NHK, NHNZ, France Televisions, Science Channel and Animal Planet)

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 work-

ing 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." Danmarks 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 primetime series to one-off films. But for me, co-pro isn't just about the high-end films, 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 ac-

quisitions. 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

partnership with NHK," he says. "This involves OTF re-versioning 12 hours of wildlife produced by NHK's team, primarily for sales to France and Germany."

At the same time, OTF is in the final year of a co-pro venture with Singapore Media Development Authority and National Geographic Channel, which has resulted in seven 60-minute films. According to Chow, the venture has been a huge success "not only in establishing OTF's footprint in Asia – it has also provided us with an opportunity to identify producers that have what it takes to produce for the international market".

If there's one question of concern for western co-producers, it is whether Asian partners are compatible from an editorial perspective. Chow admits: "Cultural differences can pose a challenge. For example, US audiences are used to a dramatic approach that may not work for the viewers in Asia, who are more reserved and less open to showcase their private lives. But companies like ours can act as a bridge. The NHK relationship is a good example. Through our experience and skill-set as filmmakers, we can help re-edit and re-package programmes that will resonate with European and US viewers — through the music, graphics and script, etc."

NHK is one of those organisations that proves east-west partnerships can work. Horie cites Volcano Dev-



Seeking partners: *Secrets Of The Third Reich* (ZDFE)

ils (French production company Boreales and NHK) and Nano Revolution (NHK, CBC, Doc Side/ARTE France) as "true co-productions". The first is a docudrama about a French couple who died in the eruption of Mount Unzen in Japan in 1991. "The script, the shooting, the directing, the post-production is all being made together. After years of discussion and patience in mutual understanding, we are proud of its completion. The programme is to be aired on NHK, France Televisions, RTBF, Planete, National Geographic Channel, RAI, and much more to follow."

Singapore has emerged as a key co-pro market in Asia, thanks to an active public strategy spearheaded by the Media Development Authority. Yeo Chun Cheng, MDA director of broadcast and music, explains: "The MDA acts as a

facilitator, linking Singapore companies with potential co-production partners, including BBC Worldwide, Discovery, FremantleMedia Enterprises, AETN All Asia Networks and National Geographic. By playing a meaningful role in co-productions, Singapore companies get to co-own IP and enhance their distribution networks. They also develop valuable business relationships, networking links and track records, which can open up new opportunities."

Yeo says there has been an increase in co-production activity in his region and cites two reasons. "First, companies producing content with Asian elements are able to save on costs for talent, equipment and post-production work by partnering with an Asian production house. Furthermore, Singapore is a natural stepping stone to a richly diverse Asia."

It also helps that Singapore is a pioneer in next-generation production: "An example is the partnership between AAA Networks and the MDA to support Singapore-based media companies in the production of TV series with digital media components. Two programmes, *Hidden Cities* and *Partners in Crime*, have been produced under the collaboration. The MDA has also embarked on its first non-traditional media partnership, with Singapore's MediaCorp xinmsn online platform."

There are a number of arguments in favour of non-traditional partnerships. Aside from the funding stream that ancillary services such as new media can provide, there are technological factors such as the rise of 3D, Satin says. It is an area Parthenon is exploring closely. "Because it's a young area, it is attracting interest from non-traditional partners – ranging from facilities houses to entrepreneurial City funds. With its ability to work across TV, cinema, Imax and new-media platforms it's open to new co-pro models."

TARGET 400 MILLION!

Why Poverty?, a series of films which explores ways to tackle the pervasive and corrosive influence of poverty is due to be broadcast in late 2012. Its aim is to reach 400 million viewers via partners the BBC DRTV, YLE, VPRO, SVT, NRK, ZDF/ARTE, ORF, NHK, SUN TV, Taiwan Public TV, Futura, SABC and Al Arabiya.

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 forecast 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



Planet Egypt (ZDFE)