Eyes on the World

Current-affairs documentaries that help put complex world issues into context are always in demand.

By Bill Dunlap

Stuff happens, to recall the words of Forrest Gump.

And it keeps happening, meaning that the one genre that documentary filmmakers will never have to worry about exhausting is current affairs.

To take it one step further, some of the worst stuff that happens makes for some of the most successful current-affairs documentaries. Turmoil in the Middle East, earthquakes and volcanoes, floods and tsunamis, global climate change, wars, the miners trapped in Chile, terrorist attacks—these were the subjects of multiple documentaries last year and this year.

Many of those documentaries come from public broadcasters with well-funded news operations and mandates with more emphasis on explaining recent events than on turning profits. But when the events are global in impact, the public broadcasters’ commercial arms bring the documentaries to market.

Alexander Coridass, the president and CEO of ZDF Enterprises, sees high demand in the international marketplace for programs that help viewers understand events like catastrophic accidents and terror attacks.

“We always call them background stories,” he says. “They are more in depth, with more details. If you know the background, you know it better than if you just knew the event. There is always an interest in the market for profound analysis.”

UNIQUE INSIGHT

Coridass says today’s viewers aren’t as interested in what he calls “classical documentaries that explain things,” but they will respond to a strong, well-told story. “We know there are terrorist forces in the world and there are ecological problems,” he explains. “The question is how you present it. Are you able to bring something really interesting? Our job is to present it in a way that is new, exciting, that offers new insights and information and that brings new techniques. I wouldn’t say there is something that always works. It depends on your approach and the making of it.”

The Al Qaeda attacks on the United States in 2001 spawned dozens of current-affairs documentaries that continue to resonate as the tenth anniversary approaches.

“For us, it’s so interesting that a third of the U.S. population believes the government was involved in the attacks,” Coridass says. “We are dealing with that with 9/11: Science and Conspiracy.”

The program uses forensic experiments to explore both the official story and related conspiracy theories, and examines why these theories persist in our culture, despite official government reports.

ZDF Enterprises’ recent successes include Natascha Kampusch, the story of an Austrian girl who was kidnapped at the age of 10 and held eight years until she escaped. “It turned out she is a very interesting and intelligent young woman,” Coridass says. “We found, at least in Europe, a huge interest.”

The four-part India Reborn deals with the rise of India in the last decade. “We did something like that five or ten years ago with China,” Coridass says. “A lot of people [are interested in] these developing countries. We try to put emphasis on what is happening in these territories.”

The BBC has earned a global reputation for its current-affairs coverage, much of which is made for its Panorama programming strand, sold internationally by BBC Worldwide.
“There is a market for those big global stories,” says Tim Mutimer, the senior VP for sales and distribution in Europe, the Middle East and Africa for BBC Worldwide. That doesn’t make current affairs an easy sell, though.

“It’s one of the most difficult genres we sell,” Mutimer says, “in that current affairs does differ from country to country. Where we have success is in those global stories, and by making really good programs that stand out and can sit alongside programs that are made in each country. Sometimes the resources we have mean that we can do something that they can’t.” BBC Worldwide has sold Panorama docs in more than 70 territories over the years.

The sweet spot for Mutimer is found in the combination of global issues and human-interest stories, as in Panorama’s coverage of the trapped Chilean miners last fall. “It makes audiences feel closer to news and current affairs,” he says.

For Trapped: The Chile Miners’ Story, Panorama followed families and engineers at the surface as they worked to free the men, and probed into mine-safety issues, revealing new evidence of massive safety problems in the mine being ignored just weeks before the collapse.

BP: In Deep Water, on the Gulf of Mexico oil spill last year, examined the full consequences of the disaster to fishermen and the ecosystem and the war of words between the Obama administration and an embattled BP, asking what went wrong and who was really to blame.

Mutimer also has success selling programs from another BBC strand, This World, which looks at global issues through human stories. “This World has broad appeal because in addition to the current-affairs interest, there is a human story there as well,” he says. “Topics that people really aren’t that aware of can be really interesting because of the way the story is told.”

Two recent hours from the This World strand are Surviving Haiti and Pakistan’s Flood Doctor, both of which examine disasters through human stories. Surviving Haiti follows some of the people who were rescued from death beneath the rubble: a three-year-old child, a musician, a student and a girl who was rescued after nine days.

The flood doctor is Dr. Shershad Syed, a famous surgeon from Karachi caught up in the greatest disaster to hit his country in living memory.

A third major-market public broadcaster, NHK in Japan, is a big player in current-events documentaries, and also has a program on the Chilean miners which it completed just days after their rescue.

**RIGHT ON TIME**

NHK puts a premium on timelines, according to Kazumasa Iida, the head of international program development. “Our audiences look to NHK for further explanations about what they hear in the news,” Iida says. “So, our in-house team produces current-affairs programs as timely as possible to answer the audience needs. For instance, ten days after the rescue of the Chilean miners, we made a special program, Out of the Hole: The Untold Story, which included exclusive footage that we got using our own source, of the miners as they were still trapped beneath.”

Similarly, NHK moved quickly last year with WikiLeaks: Who Owns Confidential Documents?, which included NHK’s own interview with WikiLeaks’ founder, Julian Assange. Another program with broad appeal that NHK is bringing to MIPDOC is The Game Revolution, on the video-gaming industry’s growth and the competition among developers.

**DOMESTIC POLICY**

At the same time, NHK isn’t shy about tackling subjects that might only have limited appeal internationally.

“NHK also produces many current-affairs programs on topics that are not necessarily receiving the highest interest,” Iida says. “There are always important subjects or social issues surrounding us, such as foreign affairs, an aging society, welfare, unemployment, etc., that the public should be aware of. A good example of this is a series of programs under the umbrella title Overcoming ‘The Japan Syndrome’ that NHK launched in January. The series offers intensive coverage of Japan’s national malaise rooted in years of economic and social stagnation.”

Iida also points to the international success of its 13-part series China in a Torrent. “This series takes an in-depth look at the internal affairs of China and its attempts to make historic changes as it becomes the 21st century’s economic giant,” Iida says. “The combination of extremely careful coverage and correct contacts revealed the pressing issues in China that had not been covered extensively as such. It was a courageous series and hence the program was received well internationally in both
inside," Cascio says. “We did a co-production called Inside the Koran, which looked at Islam today and the interpretations of the Koran. We did Iran and the West, an inside look at the changing relationship since the revolution in 1978. Those are issues that fit right into the sweet spot of National Geographic. They give a more in-depth look at issues of relevance.”

National Geographic provided co-production money for Sebastian Junger and Tim Hetherington’s Afghan War documentary Restrepo, which was an Academy Award nominee this year. “It’s a vérité look at life in wartime,” Cascio says. “It aired in November and was the highest-rated show on our U.S. channel for the year. It’s contemporary in that it sheds light on what’s going on in Afghanistan and it does it in a way that’s very compelling and powerful. It’s stuff you’re not going to see elsewhere.”

Currently, Cascio is following the development of Virgin Galactic, Richard Branson’s commercial space-flight venture. “We have the rights to follow that. It’s of interest to the world,” Cascio says.

Other upcoming projects include follow-up films on the 9/11 attacks and the Hurricane Katrina disaster.

Richard Propper, the founder and president of the documentary distributor Solid Entertainment in Los Angeles, calls current affairs his most interesting category. As a distributor of other people’s films, Propper’s first concern is with international appeal and he rejects some 95 percent of the films he sees either on grounds of quality or because he doesn’t see a market for them.

**IN-DEPTH ISSUES**

“Something that’s always been popular is a story that has to do with law or the breaking of laws,” Propper says. “People wrongly convicted, justice docs. The challenge is finding good ones. Current affairs have to stand above the daily static of information. It has to be in depth; it has to have a point of view; it has to be well researched. What we look for are stories that aren’t part of that normal, daily static of information.”

As an example, Propper offers Juanita Castro: Fidel’s Sister in Exile. “Juanita Castro is a woman who’s been on TV a couple of times but has never told her entire story,” Propper says. “It’s a perfect example of something you couldn’t just pick up on the Internet. This is only available in this film.”

As a pure distributor of documentaries, Propper is attentive to a program’s shelf life. “Docs related to ‘ripped from the headlines’ events and new movies that are just out have very short shelf lives,” he says. “I don’t want a film that’s old news. We look for films that straddle a big range. Timing also plays a part. I picked up the documentary on Fidel’s sister about nine months ago. It was a Spanish production”—from Discovery Latin America—"and a great film. Fidel is not going to be around for a long time. This will become ‘ripped from the headlines’ documentary. People will want information on him and we will have it.”
Another current project with broad appeal is *What Would Darwin Think?*, a film on ecological threats to the Galápagos Islands. “There are problems because of trash coming into the ecosystem and nonnative plants and animals. If anything happens in the Galápagos, there is a larger concern about that area, we have the right film.”

**CRYSTAL-BALL GAZING**

Filmmakers are always trying to anticipate what will be hot in the coming year, Propper says, with mixed results. As of late February, he hadn’t seen anything yet on the turmoil in Egypt or the Middle East. “If you had a doc on Mubarak, that would be saleable right now, but probably for a very small window,” he says.

Recent strong sellers have been *Terra Antartica*, which looks at the South Pole region in terms of global warming, mineral rights and tourism, and *Barack: Evolution of a Leader*.

“*Terra Antartica* is selling because there is a lot of curiosity about the polar ice caps melting,” Propper says. “It’s current affairs, but it has an undertow of being sort of a natural-history documentary at the same time. Our *Barack Obama* documentary contained the oldest known television interview he had ever done and it traveled quite a bit. It took his audio book as the narrative to paint the story.”

Current-affairs filmmakers face several challenges, including time constraints, shelf-life issues and tight budgets. On the plus side, though, they can be relatively inexpensive.

The need to be timely generally precludes use of expensive CGI effects or dramatic re-creations. And while producers aspire to high production values, the acceptance of home video, cell-phone video, YouTube clips and Skype transmissions on the air today make it easier to incorporate such content into current-affairs programs.

“We’re a high-def channel,” says Cascio, “but if there is available video that works, in these categories that’s what it’s all about. We did an interesting project on Hurricane Katrina five years later, where we took home-video footage and patched it together in a way that made you feel you were there and you hadn’t seen it before.”

Shelf life is an inherent problem with current affairs, naturally. “When thinking of shelf life, the best way is to find the universal message,” NHK’s lida says. “Instead of just focusing on the issue, we try to focus on the background—why and how it all occurred, which usually gives us a more universal approach to the subject.”

Aside from obvious things like not mentioning specific dates, Cascio says you need to put the emphasis on providing relatively timeless information.

“You want to look at, say, the Iceland volcano, but you want to make sure you’re giving information that will be useful and relevant six months from now,” he says.

Budgets can vary widely, with broadcasters like BBC, ZDF and NHK willing to spend lavishly on important stories and independent producers counting every penny.

Propper has seen current-affairs docs come in with budgets as low as $25,000, but many he handles are ten times that. “There are some fantastic films being done now, and probably more of them because the technology is so inexpensive,” he says.

Cascio points out that current-affairs docs often require a lot of planning and shooting, which can drive up costs. “We did a show on the counterterrorism force in New York,” he notes. “We followed them for eight or nine months, including New Year’s Eve.”

“The BBC doesn’t care if a program is profitable or not,” Mutimer says. “They care about the subject.”

Coridass says ZDF’s budgets are almost as high as for big dramas, ranging from €200,000 to €1 million euros an hour. “Sometimes producing current-affairs programs is like gambling on the stock market,” he says.