Co-production is ‘where the world meets’

Without co-production, the specialist factual end of the documentary business would likely freeze as solid as Frozen Planet. Andy Fry considers the projects, paradigms and partnerships that are keeping high-end docs hot.

The factual content business splits into two main areas. The first is the reality/factual entertainment genre, which has become a key part of free TV and pay-TV schedules in the last five to 10 years. Typically produced in large batches of episodes, top shows in this genre tend to be fully funded domestically, then taken to the international market as formats or series acquisition opportunities.

The second is a group of high-end subjects generally referred to as specialist factual. Science, history, natural history and culture are typical of the genre and tend to be produced in shorter runs with higher budgets. As a result, companies working in this field have traditionally been much more dependent on documentary co-production.

A classic example of the co-pro model is Frozen Planet, a stunning seven-part natural-history series co-produced by the BBC, Discovery Channel US and The Open University, with Discovery Channel Canada, ZDF Germany, Antena 3 Spain and Skai TV Greece attached as pre-sale partners.

Four years in the making, a project like Frozen Planet is so expensive it cannot get off the ground without pre-production commitments of this kind. Typically, productions of this scale also require a distributor on board. In this case, BBC Worldwide has sold Frozen Planet into around 120 territories, including Australia (Nine Network), Italy (Rai) and Russia (Channel One).

Many big budget co-productions have a US cable channel...
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and a public broadcaster as anchor partners. In fact, this arrangement is so common that some of the biggest players form ongoing alliances. BBC Worldwide and Discovery, for example, have a long-running partnership that currently runs until 2014 and has, in the past, led to landmark series such as Planet Earth and Blue Planet.

There is also a multi-faceted partnership between ZDF Enterprises (ZDFE) and A+E Networks that was formed in 2005 and renewed in 2011 for a further three years. A key component of this, according to ZDFE director of co-productions and development Kristina Hollstein, is a commitment to produce contemporary and ancient history programmes for ZDF in Germany and History in the US. A recent example of this is Planet Egypt, which also had co-pro stalwart ARTE on board.

“Partnerships like this make sense because working with a new company on a co-production can be time-consuming,” Hollstein says. “Working with a partner you know means you are already on a similar wavelength. There are fewer surprises as you progress from development through to production.”

Even when alliances of this kind are not formalised, there is still an inter-dependence between the US pay-TV companies and the major pubcasters. National Geographic, for example, pops up on co-pro credits repeatedly. A case in point is Dawn Of The Ocean, a Gruppe 5 production for ZDF and National Geographic Channel in co-operation with ZDFE. Along similar lines, 2010 saw National Geographic Television (NGT) sign a deal to produce three history/science hybrid specials — Machu Picchu Decoded, Gallipoli’s Deep Secrets and Quest For Solomon’s Mines — for Rai2’s primetime documentary slot Voyager. More recently, Discovery Channel joined forces with NHK and Singaporean production company Bang to make a co-production about Japan’s recovery from the 2011 tsunami and earthquake.

Key to making these alliances work is developing a production approach that enables co-pro partners to access the kind of tailored content their upfront investment entitles them to, while also ensuring that distributors have a product that can be exported to as many markets as possible.

In the case of the NGT/Rai alliance, NGT’s producers worked with Rai’s Voyager team to ensure customised programmes were delivered for Italian viewers. “Incorporating recognised hosts, local-language experts and other locally appropriate content in a National Geographic production is a cost-effective way for broadcasters to obtain relevant, high-end factual shows,” says Maryanne Culpepper, now president of NGT. She adds, however, that this was not done at the expense of the international versions available to other buyers.

A partial exception to the model outlined above is Japan’s public broadcaster NHK. While it has regular co-pro dealings with North American players, NHK’s distinct regional positioning means that it often kicks starts co-pros in a different way from its US and European peers.

Last year, for example, it signed a five-year co-production partnership with Qatar-based Al Jazeera Children’s Channel, building on a relationship that had previously spawned the Discover Science series. This year, NHK is working with KBS Korea and TV Brasil on The Miracle Body (3 x 60 mins), which uses cutting-edge film technology and science to explore the bodies of the world’s top athletes.

“Over the years, we have enjoyed successful co-productions with many of our Asian partners,” says Sayumi Horie, senior producer of international co-productions at NHK. “In fact, NHK’s first international co-pro was The Silk Road with CCTV in 1980, and the 2005 sequel series was again co-produced with them. Since 2007, we have partnered with Singapore’s MediaCorp and, with KBS coming back to The Asian Pitch last year, we are strengthening our ties with public broadcasters in Asia. Another new partnership last year was with South Korea’s EBS, which joined in the co-pro of Discover Science.”

Turning to Europe, NHK has an alliance with France Televisions that echoes the Discovery/BBC and AETN/ZDF partnerships. “This year will be a very exciting one for NHK because a number of our co-production projects will be ready for broadcast,” Horie says. “The biggest series will be The Cosmic Shore with France5, Discovery Canada and NFB. This is a science documentary that explores optical phenomena occurring in the earth-space boundary zone.”

“We are seeing some ‘true co-productions’, in the sense that we do every process together — script, shooting, directing and post-production”

Sayumi Horie

30 Years That Shook The World (ZDFE)