Key players in documentary share secrets at MIPDOC Summit

ACQUISITION executives and commissioners from five major documentary players gathered at this year’s MIPDOC Summit to give the inside story on what their companies are looking for from producers and how best to pitch.

Kristina Hollstein, director of documentary co-production and development at ZDF Enterprises, described the difficulties of pitching to a broadcaster that has no less than 12 departments and sub-departments dealing with docs.

“The best guide to what we’re looking for and who to pitch is in a document called Documentaries Airing On ZDF,” she said. “Access it online and view the trailers. That way you can see the favourite documentaries of the executive you’re approaching.”

Michael Katz, vice-president of programming and production, international division, at A&E Networks (USA), said that the group is broadening its definition of history: “We’re trying to get away from anthologies towards series that are fronted by the same characters week after week.”

National Geographic is also moving towards a more populist style. “The channel is trying to personalise its approach,” said Maryanne Culpepper, executive vice-president, editorial & new business development at National Geographic Television (US). “It looks for one- and two-hour event shows, and highly focused series such as Naked Science and Building Big.”

Jenny Westergard, YLE’s commissioning editor, has a 60-minute early evening slot and an open-ended 22.00 one. “I’m looking for human interest stories,” she said. “I leave the dark stuff to the other slots.”

Flora Gregory, editor of the Witness strand at Al Jazeera English, commissions character-led stories in 21- and 43-minute slots: “We take as many rights as possible.” But she acknowledged that budgets are still low and the broadcaster’s distribution operation is not yet mature.

While Nat Geo uses online sub-
mission, the others don’t. And Hollstein warned against e-pitching. “I delete e-mails from people I don’t know,” she said. “I read the e-mails of people I’m working with, but if you’re pitching for the first time, you need to do so in full and by post.”