Making the right partnerships

Broadcasters are still hungry for big-hitting documentaries that can stand out in the schedules, but factual production can be an expensive business and many high-end series would simply not be made without a creative approach to funding. Andy Fry looks at the latest trends in factual co-production.

CO-PRODUCTION continues to play a crucial role in factual film-making. Specialist factual events can help define a channel’s brand, but to make them happen, the financial burden usually needs to be shared out between three or four well-resourced partners.

At the high-end of factual film-making, this risk-sharing “is because producers are looking to innovate,” according to BBC Worldwide’s director of factual Mark Reynolds. “They want to keep delivering landmark programmes and it’s the job of companies like BBC Worldwide to help them put together the finance they need.”

A case in point is Africa, a sumptious six-part natural history series which has just aired to great acclaim on BBC One. “Africa involved the BBC, BBC Worldwide (BBCWW), Discovery, France TV and CCTV-9,” Reynolds says. “In that case, BBCWW sat down with the BBC Natural History Unit to work out a detailed funding plan for the series.”

Working out how to finance the show is only one part of the puzzle for execs like Reynolds. “One of the biggest challenges is making sure all the partners get what they want. For example, France 2 doesn’t have a weekly slot for this kind of show. So it ran a 90-minute special. Afterwards France 5 ran the full Africa six-parter.”

This tailoring of requirements has become a bigger issue in recent years because broadcasters increasingly want “We regularly meet up on the eve of MIP to talk business. Getting the likes of ZDFE, FRTV, NHK and National Geographic together is a way of preparing everyone for new developments in the sector”

Nikolas Huelbusch
their shows to have a local feel. “We had an interesting situation with How The Earth Made Us, a co-production with ZDF. The BBC double-shot the series so that there was one version with a presenter and one version without. A year later, ZDF went out to the same locations and shot additional sequences with their own presenter.”

The BBC has a rock solid co-pro alliance with Discovery that goes back to the 1990s. However this doesn’t preclude the involvement of new partners, Reynolds says. “We’ve now done three deals with CCTV-9 in China — Africa, Wonders Of Life and Generation Earth. We also recently did our first-ever co-production with RTL on a series called The Hidden Kingdom (3 x 60 mins). That’s a good illustration of how broadcasters are looking to get event factual programming at an effective price.”

Co-production also continues to play a key role in the way ZDF Enterprises (ZDFE) conducts its business. “Co-productions are complex so they only really make sense for big projects,” Nikolas Huelbusch, project manager of factual co-productions and development, says. “For us, it would usually be on major history productions like Doomsday World War 1, a series which looks at WW1 as a prelude to WW2. In that case we have two major partners, Discovery Europe and France Television.”

Echoing Reynolds, Huelbusch says that this kind of project requires tailoring to different markets. “The ZDF version of Doomsday is for Germany, so it focuses on the way German soldiers felt in the trenches. For the international market you need a version with a broader range of examples and archive.”

ZDFE is at MIPTV with a couple of ancient history projects that need partners. One of these is a new look at great cultures such as the Greeks, Romans and Vikings. The other, Carthage’s Lost Warriors, uses a DNA analysis to explore the theory that Carthaginian sailors crossed the Atlantic and helped contribute to the development of pre-Columbian culture in Latin America.

ZDFE, FRTV, NHK and National Geographic together it’s a way of preparing everyone for new developments in the sector.”

An example would be rights. “With the rollout of DTT, online TV, VOD and other non-standard platforms, co-production has got more complex,” Huelbusch says. “You need to differentiate strictly between all the rights to make sure everyone gets what they need. Who has first use? How long is the window? Is it exclusive or non-exclusive?” Such questions become ever more difficult now that the US-backed thematic channels are operating in the same geographic footprint as their historic partners.

Sayumi Horie, senior producer of international co-production, at Japan’s NHK, has a number of examples of how co-production has helped the broadcaster achieve its editorial goals. Top of the list is Legends Of The Deep: Giant Squid, a co-production with Discovery Channel in association with ZDF and ARTE. “This is our latest co-production project in which the team’s four-year mission was rewarded with the success of capturing the world’s first-ever image of the living giant squid,” Horie says. “It’s a good example of successful co-production, where both parties contributed not only to the financing of the expedition but also brought together talent and expertise. Scientists from Japan, the United States, and New Zealand came together with their own ideas and techniques. NHK developed a special ultra-sensitive HD camera that can withstand filming in the deep sea and a special light invisible to squid. But NHK alone could not
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have achieved this great success.”
Other projects show the kind of partners that NHK typically works with. The Cosmic Shore, for example, is a co-pro with WGBH’s NOVA and France 5 while The Next Megaquake is a co-pro with National Geographic Channels International. Women, Keeping The World Turning, meanwhile, is a co-pro with Point du Jour and France 5 which portrays 10 women in different countries with different backgrounds.
The latter is an interesting project because it shows that two broadcasters can decide to back the same creative execution. “Often, in a documentary like this, broadcasters prefer to concentrate on one protagonist from their own country, resulting in various versions of the documentary,” Horie says. “However, on this project, we worked very closely with our co-producers from the early stages of the development and managed to agree on characters and storyline from the get-go, thereby resulting in one common version for both France and Japan.”
A key message from Horie is that no two co-productions are the same. “We engage in all types of co-pros. In projects such as Life Force II (co-production with NHNZ, an exploration of evolution through the fusion of blue-chip natural history and science) and Women, Keeping The World Turning, NHK is involved in all aspects of the creative process from script development to actual filming, as well as in contributing to the promotion and distribution of the programme. NHK may also contribute to the co-production by providing special technical equipment developed by NHK’s renowned technology lab. At the opposite end of the co-pro spectrum, NHK may also take on a minor role as a co-financier.”
While co-pros are invariably different, there’s a common factor in their success, Horie says: co-operation. “We work closely with our partners to share information and footage so that all parties will be satisfied. Although collaborative work can often require much time and patience, by sharing the vision and goal of the project, the parties can ensure a good end result for everyone.”
The Smithsonian Network, a joint venture between the Smithsonian Institute and Showtime Networks, is now providing an alternative entry into the US market for European partners. A good illustration was the project 9/11: Day That Changed The World, produced by Brook Lapping Productions for Smithsonian Channel in association with ITV. Interestingly, that project was also picked up by France 3 and NHK with BBC Worldwide taking the remaining international rights. Another recent example was Beauty, The Beast And The Truth, a co-pro involving Smithsonian Network, ARTE and ORF subsidiary Universum, which is expanding out of natural history

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Anthony Geffen

The Hidden Kingdom, the BBC’s first-ever co-production with RTL

into history.
While the above examples focus on the dynamics of broadcaster-broadcaster co-productions, there’s also a lot of activity at producer-level, as companies seek to get their projects made without losing all of the valuable back-end rights in the process.
A key trend here is for high-end factual producers to either become part of bigger cash-rich entities or to build alliances that will allow them to share the risk and reward on their projects.
An example of the former is leading French producer Mona Lisa, which is part of the Zodiac Media group. Currently, rights division Zodiac Rights is pitching for co-pro partners on Lengguru: The Lost World, a 90-minute special, commissioned by ARTE and co-produced with France’s Institute of Research for Development (IRD).
Andreas Lemos, vice-president, factual acquisitions and programming Zodiac Rights, explains the attraction: “Mona Lisa is at the centre of pioneering technological advances that have revolutionised the way we

Space Dive, a co-production with the BBC and National Geographic

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see the natural world. From Environmental Scanning Electron Microscope (ESEM) photography which reveals the ‘invisible’ world of microscopic organisms, to CGI techniques that render that world’s creatures every bit as thrilling as anything found in a wildlife documentary. Their current slate provides spectacular opportunities for this technology to be put to use.”

In the case of the Lengguru project, Mona Lisa was granted permission to visit the region in 2010 and came back having discovered 40 brand new species. It has now been given permission to go back with even more kit in the hope of massively increasing the new species count. Leading the hunt for partners is Zodiak Rights CEO Matthew Frank. “Zodiak Rights is better-known for its factual entertainment. But when the opportunity arises we like to have special events for the catalogue. What makes this interesting to us is the technology and the access. We know that there aren’t a dozen other producers in Lengguru because Mona Lisa is the only one that has access.”

Another project which underlines Mona Lisa’s unique capabilities is Life On Us (1 x 90 mins). Commissioned by ARTE/SBS Australia and co-produced with Smith & Nash, this film is set to take “a microscopic safari around the human body to meet the weird and wonderful organisms who live, breed and die on our bodies”. An example of an indie that hasn’t become part of a bigger group is Atlantic Productions, a pioneering factual producer that has pushed back the boundaries of both 2D and 3D filmmaking, winning award after award with productions like David Attenborough’s First Life (2D) and Kingdom Of Planets (3D).

Atlantic CEO Anthony Geffen says the company’s track record has enabled it to maintain its independence, but he acknowledges that getting the commercial side of the business right is crucial. For this reason, he has hired rights veteran John Morris as commercial director in order to make sure that Atlantic is maximising the revenues it can achieve across media platforms.

In the case of 3D, Atlantic secured itself a level of stability by forming a JV company with Sky called Colossus which has resulted in acclaimed series like Galapagos 3D. But even so, “the market is tough because there aren’t a lot of players to sell to”, Geffen says. “Our approach is to release projects to iMax and then create 2D and 3D versions of the shows. This increases the number of potential customers. I also think new distribution outlets like apps will ultimately help make the market in 3D more sustainable.”

As for 2D, Atlantic is following up hit series First Life with a new Attenborough project called The Rise Of Animals. As with First Life, the main co-pro partners are Discovery, the BBC and ABC Australia. There was some competition around the Australian rights but Geffen wanted to work with ABC for a couple of reasons. The first is good old-fashioned loyalty. The second is that working with the same partners takes some of the pain out of the complicated co-pro process. “More TV stations have their own editorial niche, which means

we need to respond with versions that will work for their market. But in the case of The Rise Of Animals we start with a good understanding of what the channels want.”

The increasing complexity of buyer demands also explains why Geffen doesn’t like to have too many co-pro partners involved. “My main concern is always storytelling, so I try not to have too many partners in case it starts to compromise the narrative.”

One way of controlling the number of broadcasters involved is to lay off some of the rights to a distributor. So it’s noticeable that a number of Atlantic projects have FremantleMedia International (FMI) on board — examples being Dino Gangs, Engineering The Impossible (both Discovery Channel/FMI) and Rome Unwrapped (National Geographic Channel, Channel 5, La7 and FMI). Like Zodiak, FMI has made a point of adding factual events to its catalogue, the most recent example being Half The Sky: Turning Oppression Into Opportunity For Women Worldwide. Aired on PBS last autumn, worldwide distributor FMI has just sold the series to

TALES OF SIX CITIES

INDIE producer Windfall Films has just completed a big-budget six-part factual series called Strip The City. It uses the kind of CGI seen in the movie Inception to peel back the layers of six iconic cities, uncovering their inner workings. Cities covered include Dubai, San Francisco, Sydney, Toronto, London and Rome.

The scale of the series meant it needed co-producers to get it off the ground, says Carlo Massarella, Windfall’s resident co-pro expert. “If you want to do things like this properly, you need the budget. In this case, we were fortunate because The Science Channel, Discovery Canada and Discovery Networks international all committed at about the same time. We were then able to get a financial top-up from Network Seven Australia and France 5.”

Getting three partners to greenlight at the same time was critical says Massarella. “We’ve had a number of projects which have fallen through because we only had one backer and couldn’t get the others. The idea itself isn’t enough, it has to have current value to appeal.”

The six cities have been chosen because they are world-famous and they tell distinctive and interesting stories. But it’s not an accident that four of them are also directly relevant to the funding partners. “Everyone wants their own version, and those versions need to have some elements that work for their audiences.”

Windfall’s partner Handel has been working in the co-production space for decades. Right now, Handel is as busy as it has ever been – working on projects like Inside the Mind Of Leonardo (with WCI), Brave New World With Stephen Hawking (WCI), Ultimate Tutankhamen (with Blink Films), Scam City (with Zig Zag) and Atlantis – The Definitive Guide, a project destined for Discovery Canada and Discovery Science in the US. “It’s an area we’re embracing because it’s how you get the budgets for ambitious productions,” Founder and CEO Alan Handel says. “That’s more true now because of the need for elements like CGI and dramatic reconstruction to make productions stand out.”

Strip The City (Windfall Films)
Discovery Networks Latin America/US Hispanic for use in 44 countries.

Bo Stehmeier, managing director, distribution at leading factual specialist Off the Fence (OTF) says much of the co-production in the factual sector is actually taking place at the next tier down — and is driven by commercial rather than creative imperatives. “Where OTF does well is acting as a broker between producers and broadcasters. The key is helping channels to buy into the programme supply line.”

Stehmeier paints a picture in which reduced budgets mean that broadcasters are more reliant on co-production to secure single films and short-run series in the field of specialist factual. But at the same time, there are fewer executives in-house to manage the co-production process.

“Broadcasters will always insist on close involvement with the auteur projects that will be crown jewels in their schedules. But most are not resourced to do the same with the new level down in terms of budgets. This is where OTF steps in,” Stehmeier says. “Because we have a long track record in selling genres like natural history, we can alert broadcasters to others that are looking for a similar show and manage the process. We can also help producers that have a commissioning channel but need a pre-sale to go into production.”

While Stehmeier is right to stress the downward pressure on factual budgets, he is also able to report a more upbeat trend — the ability to access funds from non-broadcast sources. “We are working with the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, which has launched Tangled Bank Studios, a producer that wants to make high-end science documentaries,” Stehmeier says. “We will raise co-production finance and distribute the films internationally.”

“Our goal is to capture the adventure and excitement of science and share that with mass audiences via great entertainment,” says Tangled Bank CEO Michael Rosenfeld — this year’s MIPDoc keynote speaker. He has already announced the studio’s first slate of titles, which are expected to weigh in at around $1m per episode. Both will air on PBS in the US and include: Your Inner Fish, a scientific adventure story which travels from Kenya to the Arctic Circle to uncover the 3.5-billion-year history of the human body (produced in collaboration with Windfall Films); and The Quest To Map The World, a three-part series that tells the story of the scientists and explorers who risked their lives to map the planet and changed our understanding of the world we inhabit (produced in conjunction with National Geographic Television).

Still on the subject of non-standard partners, BBCWW’s Reynolds also has an interesting example in the shape of Space Dive, a co-production with National Geographic which looked at MIPTV keynote speaker Felix Baumgartner’s record-breaking skydive from the edge of space. That project, which also involved Baumgartner’s backer Red Bull Media House, was one of the hits of the year — selling to more than a dozen broadcasters worldwide within six weeks of the jump.

“What it showed,” Reynolds says, “is that co-production can also play its part in fast-turnaround documentary if you have great access.”