With a nod to Sigmund Freud’s famous question about women, what do commissioning editors at the world’s factual channels really want? Or, one might ask, what’s on their wish lists?

Freud supposedly went to his grave without divining an answer to that question about women and, truth to tell, commissioning editors generally aren’t all that willing or able to bare their dreams, either.

Some inkling of their fondest desires, though, may be evident in the kinds of documentaries they’ve put at the forefront of their recent and upcoming schedules.

For the folks at the Discovery Channel, it would be hard to wish for anything bigger than having a famous producer and director like James Cameron (The Terminator, Titanic), come in with a controversial documentary about Jesus Christ.

At National Geographic Channels International (NGCI), it could be that the National Geographic Society would uncover something as newsworthy as the Gospel of Judas and bring filmmakers in before making the find public.

For America’s Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), it might be that Ken Burns would turn his eye to the signature event of the 20th century, the Second World War, and have stars like Tom Hanks narrating key roles.

Over at The History Channel, the wish might just be that its big event of the first quarter, The Dark Ages, not go head to head with Cameron’s The Lost Tomb of Jesus, as it did in its U.S. premiere on March 4. (The History Channel reported 2.3 million viewers for Dark Ages while Discovery secured 4.1 million for Lost Tomb.)

“We don’t have any specific wish list as to what we’re looking for,” says Peter Gaffney, The History Channel’s VP for scheduling, acquisitions and digital. “We brainstorm all the time. I wouldn’t say there was anything we’d like to do that we haven’t been able to. Some of our ideas come from outside, but a lot come from sitting around and looking at what’s working and what’s not working.”

The programming trend these days is toward a more series-based schedule, Gaffney says. “While we still do special events, they’re not as prominent on the schedule as they had once been. We reserve only a couple of time slots throughout the week for specials, while the rest of the schedule is pretty much series-based.”

Gaffney is keeping an open mind about what kinds of programs might be considered events on the channel. “We know certain types of topics work for us, but we try not to look for anything specific, because when you start to do that, that’s
Digging for the truth: One of Discovery Channel's biggest new projects is *The Lost Tomb of Jesus,* executive-produced by James Cameron.

when you aren’t as open to things that are very different, that will pop,” he explains. “We’re trying different things, experimenting with different formats. We’re not doing quite as much military history, although it’s still an important part of our lineup. We’re branching out in different areas.”

The History Channel generally does one relatively high-profile special each quarter, such as *The Dark Ages* in March. “We may not put tremendous off-air marketing behind them,” he says, “but we like to focus on about one per quarter as a bigger event for us.”

*The Dark Ages* started with an internal discussion. “We were talking about the idea of looking at a particular year [in history] and it happened to be in the Dark Ages,” Gaffney says. “It sort of grew from there to cover six centuries, from the fall of Rome to the beginnings of the European Renaissance.”

*The Dark Ages* is typical of what the channel wants to do in the future, he says. “We will continue to focus on a certain number of specials that are traditional storytelling. We will have a surprise or two in there. We like to choose topics that we know people know about but they don’t necessarily know all the details. What we offer our viewers is a lot of depth of information. We’ll go deep into the Dark Ages. We tell great stories and give a lot of great information. Our viewers eat that stuff up.”

**BIG-NAME APPEAL**

At PBS in the U.S., John Wilson, the senior VP and chief TV programming executive, says most broadcasters are both reactive and proactive when it comes to developing new ideas. “That’s true for us,” he says. “PBS receives something in the area of 3,000 proposals a year, so we are sitting under a waterfall of ideas being pitched into us. We spend a lot of time sifting through those, looking for the next big idea.”

Echoing Gaffney, Wilson says that the first order of business is to offer a strong regular schedule of programs. “We want to make sure our schedule is made up of really strong, ongoing series, those icons, as we like to call them, that the public thinks of when they think of PBS—everything from *Masterpiece Theatre* to *Nature* and *Nova* and *Frontline* and *American Experience.* Those series need to be there week in and week out. But we also know we need in our schedule, about four times a year, a major event that we think of as a tent pole.”

Those tent poles, which are not necessarily documentaries, will likely get a boost by a repurposing of the Program Challenge Fund, which is jointly administered by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and PBS. Beginning this year, the fund “will begin to more fully fund high-visibility, high-impact limited series and feature-length documentaries that offer a definitive take on a subject or break new ground in popular, public-service media,” CPB and PBS announced a little while back.

Wilson says that the fund may actually inspire something of a wish list at PBS. “When we redesigned the fund, we said we would hold open the option for ourselves as programmers to look down the road and say, ‘We’re just not seeing this or that in the pipeline or through the regular submission process,’” he says. “We’re holding open the option to say, ‘The next round or the following round, what we’re looking for is X. We want producers to submit proposals that will bring us the following.’ That would give the producers some real sense of what it is we need. So it’s very much part of this new mode of operating to be more proactive in that regard.”

Wilson didn’t have any announcements about specific tent-pole programs coming out of the fund, but he is eagerly anticipating Ken Burns’ *The War* in September; it is funded through different channels.

“When someone asks, ‘What’s coming in the fall?’ we say *The War,* by Ken Burns,” Wilson says. “It’s a terrific film. We’re
Epic landscapes: The Great Wall is a new commission for ZDF.

attaching an enormous amount of outreach to it so our stations have a very clear role in how they can extend it into their communities by connecting the dots to local veterans, to gathering up stories from veterans for an oral-history project, with a lot of different bells and whistles attached to make sure this resonates beyond its tenure in the schedule. What sets it apart is that it is such an intimate telling of the war. It’s not about maps and battlefields and strategies and stuff. It’s really about the people who lived it and fought it, on the battlefield and on the home front.”

SEEKING DIRECTION

Although Wilson doesn’t make a point of seeking out marquee directors, one key attraction for many PBS events has been the hand of directors like Burns, Martin Scorsese (No Direction Home: The Blues), and Clint Eastwood and Wim Wenders (The Blues).

“We’ve got Ken on a track and we can slot those in a calendar over many years,” Wilson says. “We’re not going to go out and try and get all-star directors to do all these tent poles for us, but we certainly wouldn’t walk away from them if they have the right idea.”

Wilson especially likes tent-pole events that come out of regular series. “Our ongoing series can be providers of these when they have special major works,” he says. “Now brought us The Elegant Universe. Certainly that would qualify as a major event. Just as American Masters brought us the Dylan biography, No Direction Home. That clearly fits the bill. It doesn’t have to be a documentary, but if you look back on our track record and what has worked for us, as often as not it is a documentary.”

Taking that one step further, American Experience and Frontline are collaborating for the first time on The Mormons, which looks at the history and current role of the Mormon church. “In 150 years, it has gone from having its founders chased from every state they set up a home in to a mainstream religion that is growing faster than any other,” notes Wilson.

Commissioning editors at the German public broadcaster ZDF also often respond to pitches from outside sources, but they have some limited wish lists too, according to Kristina Holstein, the director of international co-production and development at ZDF Enterprises. “Commissioning editors have a wish list for a certain strand,” she says. “For instance, ZDF is looking for underwater archaeology for a strand called Diving into the Unknown. That has been an ongoing strand for a couple of years, and of course ZDF is looking for programs for this strand.”

Holstein, who works closely with ZDF commissioning editors on co-productions, says the main things they are looking for in terms of big-event programs are simply new ideas. “What are the new projects that are coming up on topics that haven’t been done in the past?” she asks. “At the moment, we have co-produced with Discovery U.S. a three-part program, Update: The World in 50 Years. We have been talking to different scientists and institutes and have been shooting all around the world to show viewers what their lives will look like 50 years from now. It’s a combination of science fiction and science. This is the type of project commissioning editors are looking for because it’s new and has not been done before.”

Holstein sees something of a trend in big documentaries about the future, but points out that ZDF is also doing 20th-century-history and ancient-history projects. “We’re currently doing The Wehrmacht: Draining a Balance, five hours on Nazi Germany’s armed forces. But you need to find new angles and approaches to make it interesting for the German audience and also for an international audience. You’ll find more reenactments, and we’re shooting it in English and German at the same time, with very high production values. You can only afford it if you know you’re going to sell and refinance it through the international market.”

Other event documentaries from ZDF this year are The Great Wall and The Forbidden City, both of which focus on the early history of China.

ITALIAN WISH LIST

Historical documentaries have been performing well on Mediaset’s Retequattro network in Italy as well, and in particular, programs about contemporary history. “In fact, 90 percent of the documentary output on the network consists of contemporary history,” says Andrea Broglio, the head of documentary programs at Mediaset. For Broglio, and Retequattro’s audience, contemporary history encompasses events that have taken place from the end of World War I to the present.

As Broglio explains, Mediaset has co-production agreements with the BBC and ZDF and acquires programs from Channel 4. He is also working with Austrian and Greek partners—because of their geographic proximity to Italy and their related histories—to produce contemporary history programs that can be of interest to audiences in all three countries.

High on Broglio’s wish list are projects connected to 1968, given that next year marks the 40th anniversary of that tumultuous year. From the student and worker uprisings in France and other European countries to the Prague Spring to the Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy assassinations to the Tet offensive and the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, one would think there would be numerous programs in the works. But Broglio has yet to find something he feels would satisfy his audience.
THE POWER OF EVENTS

Over at National Geographic, the commissioners at the channels have the luxury of being part of the National Geographic Society, an organization dedicated to exploration and uncovering big stories.

“Events are a cornerstone of our programming strategy,” says Geoff Daniels, the senior VP of development and production at NGCI. “In any given year, we are probably looking for four to eight major events. A number of these are going to be coming out of scientific discovery, things the Society is doing, the things the real scientists and explorers are digging up. We don’t sit here and come up with highly prescriptive things and say, ‘We want to make an event out of X or Y subject.’ It’s a much more organic process in many ways.”

The quintessential National Geographic event, in Daniel’s eyes, was last year’s The Gospel of Judas. “That was a major cross-divisional Society effort that created an international sensation,” he says. “We were praised for a major event on religious mystery, given the global traction of The Da Vinci Code. We had been sniffing around the category and then out of the Society’s side we caught wind of this discovery of the codex and the next thing you know we’re off and running in a big way. We knew there was a strong interest for these kinds of subjects, so we’re constantly staying alert for what’s in the water.”

Daniels says he doesn’t want to try to create events around movie and book releases or current news. “We’re trying to work within the realm of things that are topical but have an evergreen profile,” he says. “There are certain things that are never going to go away: religion and faith, pandemic disease. Or when you look at ongoing mysteries like the miracle of life. Those interests will never go out of style.”

That being said, Daniels is creating an event around Earth Day, which is April 22, with a full day of programs. “Earth Day is an extension of where we as a society and channel are going in terms of looking at green content, stories about environ-
U.S. or with our sister channels in Discovery Networks International.”

The History Channel commissions more than 90 percent of its schedule, Gaffney says, which consists mostly of its regular series.

“We have a deal with ZDF where we will go in and co-produce a certain amount of programming,” he says. “We have some, a few percent, that we acquire. That could be documentary content or a series like Band of Brothers (which we picked up a few years ago and is still on the channel) or theatrical films.”

Event specials are generally commissions, but not necessarily terribly expensive ones, Gaffney says. “We spend a little bit more on these events than we do on some other things,” he says. “If we’re going to make the effort to focus on them and do off-air marketing, we want to put our best foot forward. If they work, and most of them do, we play them multiple times over the course of years. We generally have home-video rights, so we’ll sell DVDs, and those have long tails after the premiere. Now, with other outlets like iTunes, where you can see these programs as well, they have years of life. The Dark Ages will show up on our affiliate channels all over the world, plus we will syndicate it internationally.”

**DIGGING DEEPER**

On the series side, The History Channel will premiere Cities of the Underworld this month. “We go to cities throughout the world and look at what’s underneath the surface,” Gaffney says. “There’s a lot of history that is under the ground of these cities.”

PBS, which has a unique relationship with its member stations as producers and broadcasters, uses a variety of funding strategies for its programs. Producing stations and independents call on a variety of underwriters on their own as well as PBS and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

“Producing stations often do co-production deals,” Wilson explains. “We also have a track record of having worked directly with U.K. producers and distributors on nurturing ideas and bringing them along. Sometimes we’ll get pitched an idea we like a lot from a producer and will put them together with one of our producing stations. We work directly with producers and distributors all the time, and we work with our producing stations. There’s no rigid procedure.”

The first round of greenlighting new productions under the revamped PBS-CPB Program Challenge Fund began last month. Until recently, the fund, founded in 1987, would provide producers with seed money and then ask them to find completion money. That made Wilson’s job more difficult because it was time-consuming for the producers, who often had to push back production schedules.

“We want to focus the fund on causing these big events to happen and to fund them at a level that will cause them to happen on the timeline we need them to happen in,” Wilson says.