



By Bill Dunlap

Blue Chip And Beyond

Multipart documentaries are sitting alongside expensive wildlife specials in channels' prime-time schedules.

Endangered species have long been favorite subjects for the makers of blue-chip prime-time documentaries. Filmmakers would stalk the few remaining snow leopards or black rhinos or giant pandas for a couple of years to produce beautiful hour-long or two-hour specials.

But lately, that kind of expensive, narrowly focused documentary is showing some signs of becoming an endangered species itself. They're not going away, of course, but the big producers of blue-chips are leaning more toward broad subjects that lend themselves to mini-series of four, six, eight or more hours.

Multipart documentaries can be produced to high standards at lower per-hour cost when compared with one-offs, network executives say, and they offer greater promotion opportunities.

Examples of recent and upcoming documentary mini-series include, from ZDF in Germany, *Last Secrets of the Third Reich* (six hours), *Holy War* on militant Islam (four hours) and *Planet Egypt* (four hours). From the BBC in the U.K., there is the recently aired *Frozen Planet* (seven hours) and the upcoming *History of the World* (eight hours), both co-produced by Discovery Channel, *Attenborough's Life Stories* (three hours) and *Brazil with Michael Palin* (four hours). HISTORY has *Mankind* *The Story of All of Us* (12 hours), *The Men Who Built America*

(eight hours) and the recent *Vietnam in HD* (six hours), and from National Geographic Channel there is *Untamed Americas* (four hours).

APPOINTMENT VIEWING

HISTORY, which has had booming ratings with reality series like *American Pickers* and *Paun Stars*, sees mini-series as a way to increase viewership of its documentary offerings.

"We were doing 52 two-hour specials a year," says Dirk Hoogstra, the channel's senior VP of development and programming. "From a ratings perspective, they weren't keeping pace with our series numbers. We realized that if you're doing 52 specials a year, they're not going to feel all that special. If you do a big six-part event and you do it in a way that feels like appointment viewing, that seems to be a better strategy for us."

While HISTORY continues to develop reality series, such as its new *Full Metal Jousting*, Hoogstra says historical documentaries will always be a key part of the schedule.

"*The Men Who Built America* focuses on the industrial age and the big robber barons who built the financial and industrial superpower that is this country," he says. "From the time that the Civil War ended until World War II, we went from what looked like a failed experiment to superpower in a short



Back in time: The four-part *Planet Egypt* aired during ZDF's prime-time *Terra X* block.

time. This focuses on the key players, the J. P. Morgans and Vanderbilts and their stories, what their impact was."

The 12-hour *Mankind The Story of All of Us* is a natural follow-up to the network's earlier *America The Story of Us*, Hoogstra says.

"We decided, let's make it even bigger and tell the whole course of human civilization. There are a million reasons, over the course of our time on this planet, where we could have been wiped out completely. We home in on those key moments. It's really these amazing coincidences over time that allowed us to get to where we are now. It's like we're looking at man as the underdog, overcoming all these odds to be able to be this superhero."

The channel calls *Mankind* an "ambitious" and "cinematic" production with CGI effects and dramatic reconstructions of the most critical events in human history.

REAL DRAMA

Blurring the line between documentary and drama is the scripted six-hour mini-series *The Hatfields and McCoys: An American Vendetta*, starring Kevin Costner and Bill Paxton. "That's a core piece of American history," Hoogstra says. "It coincides with the anniversary of the Civil War, which is where the feud was born. We make our historical dramas as historically accurate as possible. We've had historians poring over the scripts. At some point you have to make some dramatic leaps, but it's really important to us and to our viewers that it has at its core a lot of historical basis."

HISTORY doesn't disclose budgets for its series, but Hoogstra acknowledges that blue-chip documentaries are relatively expensive.

"I want to pay for the show they tell me they're going to deliver," he says. "I don't look at what the market says an hour of programming should cost. There's a wide range, depending on the subject matter. If you're out in the wilderness and there are a lot of unknowns, there's going to be a

different budget than something in a set location."

The channel, which has a long-standing relationship with the German public broadcaster ZDF, chiefly for World War II programs, has cut back on the number of co-production deals it enters. "We do very little co-production," Hoogstra says. "We want to fully commission and wholly own. We still have a relationship with ZDF and we continue to do some strategic things like that. It helps with our international business, but it's a small percentage."

X MARKS THE SPOT

At ZDF, too, the emphasis is on mini-series documentaries. ZDF has a Tuesday evening documentary slot, but its showcase documentary block is *Terra X* on Sunday evenings at 7:30 p.m., which is increasingly devoted to series of two to six parts, says

Kristina Hollstein, the director of co-productions and development for factual at ZDF Enterprises.

"*Terra X* really is a brand in Germany," Hollstein says. "There may be one-offs, but usually we have series in the *Terra X* slot. And that does very well in terms of marketing."

While most of ZDF's programming on the Nazi era has been pushed back to late-night slots, the broadcaster still does one series a year on World War II in prime time, Hollstein says.

Last Secrets of the Third Reich in the *Terra X* slot uncovers little-known stories about the most powerful Nazis, including the fact that Adolf Hitler pretended to be poor but amassed a huge private fortune.

"We would only have *Last Secrets* in prime time if there was new material that had been found and new archives or investigations, and that was the case," Hollstein says. "We have looked at these individuals before, but now there are new archives and documents found that made it worthwhile to have another look."

The four-hour *Planet Egypt* attempts to find out why the world's first great civilization was also its longest-lasting. "What was the glue that made this empire persist for more than 3,000 years?" Hollstein asks. "Egypt is a topic that still works quite well. You need to cover stories that people are already aware of in a certain way so they go to it and watch it, and then find new insights."

Holy War, also four hours, traces the history of Islam from its foundation up to the present day. "The series uses big reenactments of historical events that are really being made movie-like with very high production values," Hollstein says. "It's ancient history that looks at the origins of the Holy War. The last [episode] is about the World Trade Center attack and bin Laden, and how he was caught."

ZDF also puts some lighter documentary fare in the *Terra X* slot. One strand is *On the Road in World History*, hosted by the German actor and comedian Hape Kerkeling.



Origin story: The epic *America The Story of Us* was such a success for HISTORY that the channel is now working on a follow-up.

"He will dress up as Cleopatra or Queen Victoria," Hollstein says. "It also has little documentary [segments] and then he appears again. It's a more entertaining way of presenting history."

It's that kind of storytelling that stands out now to Hollstein. "It's not so much the topics, but the way the stories are being told, with a more modern look. One of the trends is that documentaries become more magazine-like. You have within the documentary a lot of little stories together under one umbrella. You tend to have more presenters and celebrities."

The BBC broadcasts documentary series and one-offs, but Mark Reynolds, the commercial director for factual at BBC Worldwide's Indie Unit, notes that the current economic climate has pushed most producers and distributors to focus more on series. "It's probably more acute now, but I think that's always been the distributors' preference," he says. "From our point of view, the financial model is better for us if it's a series, there's no getting away from that, but we've had equally good success with some of our single films."

Buyers see some advantages in each type, Reynolds points out. They like the flexibility one-offs provide as content for their own anthologies or strands, and they like the way a successful series can keep audiences coming back week after week. "When you look at the U.S. market, all those channels are looking more for series than singles," he continues. "If it is a single, it has to be a big special in terms of 90 minutes or two hours that you can get good promotion around."

History of the World, like HISTORY's *Mankind*, is a broad subject that demands a series, in its case eight one-hours, covering 70,000 years of human history. The series, set for later this year, is a co-production with Discovery Channel.

"The way to bring a historical documentary into a prime-time slot is by giving it all those key elements you see in drama series, in terms of the pacing, the visualization and really making sure the storytelling is as gripping as it can be," Reynolds says. "It's all rigorously researched. We're not tampering with that, but we are making sure we can bring these subjects alive in a new way and bring them to a new audience."

At 85, Sir David Attenborough is considered a national treasure in Britain for his work in broadcasting, much of it with the BBC's Natural History Unit. The upcoming three-hour *Attenborough's Life Stories* marks his 60th year in broadcasting with a biographical look at his work. "It's a look back, but it's a brand-new series," Reynolds says. "I don't think there is anyone more widely traveled for such a long period of time. He is unique in that he can give that historical perspective as to what's happened to the environment."

And Michael Palin, who has all but eclipsed his seminal role with the *Monty Python* crew by turning into a presenter and maker of travel documentaries, will be back this year with the four-hour *Brazil with Michael Palin*.

"*Brazil* is something Michael thought of and brought to the BBC," Reynolds says. "It's a massive country and, like much of South America, on the verge of an explosion in terms of its economy. We've got some big landmark sporting events coming up and whenever that happens there is a lot more interest in these countries. *Brazil* is beautifully shot and brings the history and culture through the stories people tell Michael."

Brazil and the Attenborough series are wholly owned by the BBC, while the larger scope and costs of *History of the World* required a partner. "The point of co-production is to do things on a bigger scale," Reynolds says. "In our natural-history series, the majority of those are in production from two to four years. *Frozen Planet* was four years in the making. You can't do those series on the BBC license fee alone. There is also an editorial benefit—having another pair of eyes looking at a series can really help."

GLOBAL SCALE

Crews shooting the four-hour *Untamed Americas* for National Geographic Channel (NGC) were in the field for two years, at considerable expense and risk. However, the channels' global reach and massive potential audience mean that they seldom need co-production partners.