As the worlds of entertainment and communication continue to be turned upside-down by digital, television is dominated by big-budget dramas. Combine that with the fragmented nature of viewing among young audiences and you might presume that high-end, in-depth factual content is under threat. But, Andy Fry learns, in these changing times, the documentary remains strong.

THE FUTURE FOR FACTUAL

Changing times

There is still very healthy demand for factual, says Bo Stehmeier, managing director of distribution at specialist factual studio Off the Fence (OTF), and a speaker at MIPTV this year.

"Public broadcasters have must-carry obligations and thematic channels require a lot of new factual shows, despite their recent investment in drama," Stehmeier adds. "I also think commercial broadcasters are renewing their interest in specialist factual subjects. For a while, they didn't focus so much on the lean-forward audiences that like factual TV and I think they lost them to other media. But now they are coming again for the kind of loyal, engaged fan base that loves factual programmes."

OTF shows that Stehmeier believes are indicative of the genre's health include Missing Evidence, Life Stories, Mass Extinction, Castle Builders, Tsunami: 10 Years On and Your Inner Fish, a three-parter in which paleontologist Neil Shubin explores how the human body still carries within it the legacy of animals that lived millions of years ago.

"In addition to these established players, we are seeing a lot of new platforms and channels coming to us for factual programming."

Abseilers cleaning the clock face of Big Ben in Inside The Commons (Atlantic Productions)
Stehmeier says. Recent examples include deals with YouTube channel-owner Barcroft Media (18 hours of varied content); Chinese media firm Hubu (55 hours of history and natural history); ProSiebenSat1’s male-skewing channel Maxx (58 hours of science and natural history) and South East European start-up broadcaster In The Box TV, which is acquiring a staggering 3,000 hours of factual content over two years. Stehmeier’s upbeat appraisal is echoed by others who believe that high-end factual has done a number of things to keep audiences enthusiastic. “Factual is a real bedrock of our catalogue and is looking very healthy in the run up to MIPTV,” says Zodiac Rights head of factual Emily Elisha. “For us, the key has been to find ways of telling stories in the dynamic, compelling ways audiences now expect.”

Elisha cites The Operatives, “in which a team of former military commandos travel the world fighting environmental crimes,” as an example. “It’s one of those series that works well across free TV and thematic channels,” she adds. In Elisha’s opinion, the increased use of characters, both as participants and presenters, is a trend that has helped sustain factual’s appeal: “If you can get someone who is passionate about their subject, you can win over international audiences, even if they aren’t familiar with the personality at the outset. We’re finding that with The Inca: Masters Of The Clouds, a two-parter about the Inca civilisation in the Andes. It’s presented by archaeologist Dr. Jago Cooper, who is very engaging and tells the story extremely well.”

BBC Worldwide director of factual Mark Reynolds also sees a healthy market. “Last autumn, the BBC announced its most ambitious ever commitment to natural history,” he says. “And that came on the back of a major slate announcement in 2013. We have a fantastic array of shows coming through, including Shark, Waking Giants and The Hunt. These are hugely ambitious shows that can deliver amazing audiences in primetime when they are done well.”

Reynolds adds: “The constant evolution of technology means we can keep delivering information and insights in new ways.” A case in point is Shark, a BBC Natural History Unit Discovery co-production that uses the latest 4K and high-speed camera technology to film never-before-seen behaviour in spectacular underwater locations. “We’re also really excited about The Hunt, a landmark series from Alistair Fothergill [Blue Planet], which will take a new look at predators and their prey,” Reynolds says.

Reynolds believes the new-media landscape is enriching the genre by providing more ways to get content to consumers. He cites the roll-out of BBC Earth, a cross-platform brand that provides audiences with a regular diet of wildlife content. Insights from filmmakers, updates from exotic locations, video clips and text reports all provide the basis for an on-going relationship with fans, he adds.

Lucy van Beek, a factual specialist who recently joined indie producer Brook Lapping as an executive producer, also speaks of a buoyant sector. “Brook Lapping is known for critically acclaimed historical and political documentaries such as The Iraq War, Putin, Russia and The West, 9/11: Day That Changed The World and The Hunt For Bin Laden. But I’ve been brought in to develop the science and natural history side of the company’s slate. For me, that doesn’t just mean linear TV, but also all the content that supports it.”

According to Van Beek, this transmedia approach is now an essential part of satisfying factual audiences: “People, including me, are consuming media in a different way to 10 or 15 years ago. They’ll be searching for additional information on a second screen at the same time that they have the TV on. So we need to cater for that, either by using the content that couldn’t make it into the final edit or by creating specially conceived shorts.”

The next step, Van Beek suggests, is to encourage audience participation: “I worked on Channel 4’s Dogs: Their Secret Lives. In that case, dog-owners were invited to get in touch by filling in a survey. Around 25,000 responded.”

DCD Rights has backed its belief in thought-provoking, factual TV with investment. Last
year, for example, the UK-based company added to its existing catalogue of 600 factual hours a further 200 hours from the prestigious Open University catalogue, including series such as Coast and Bang Goes The Theory. It has now acquired a further 253 hours of factual from the Electric Sky library, which went into administration during 2014. Echoing her peers, Nicky Davies Williams, CEO of DCD Rights, says: “We see factual as an important part of our growing catalogue. There’s definitely an appetite for strong, glossy non-scripted programming. Series with universal themes such as wildlife, war and investigative documentaries are sought after. Equally, series or one-offs that go behind the scenes, such as The Billion Dollar Hotel or Liberty Of London, appeal to inquisitive viewers.”

While viewers are happy to wait and watch series on traditional broadcast channels, Davies Williams says it is important to be “open-minded and flexible” regarding distribution across all platforms — particularly when trying to target younger viewers. “Social networks enable younger audiences to find subjects otherwise might not discover,” she adds. “They might use a search engine to seek out material on their favourite person or a theme, and find a clip on YouTube or a full programme and view it on a non-linear platform.”

Fred Burekson, executive vice-president and chief operating officer of ZDF Enterprises (ZDFE), says: “Factual has been a rock-solid cornerstone of our activity for decades.” Proof of this can be seen in ZDFE’s factual achievements, which include high-profile international co-productions, including Apocalypse Neanderthal, The Invasion and Doomsday: World War I; initiating projects such as Europe: The Story Of Us and World In Motion with major producers and international broadcasting partners; and brisk global sales — “even to major US networks — of factual titles such as Last Secrets Of The Third Reich, Countdown To A Catastrophe and Secret Garden.”

“Yet we have noticed momentum for superdocs involving two, three or several European broadcasters — with or without the participation of US networks,” Burekson adds. “The bundled know-how, creativity and business acumen [in these projects] cannot help but lead us to a renaissance of the classical factual

**ATLANTIC RIDES TECH WAVE**

ANTHONY Geffen, CEO and executive producer of Atlantic Productions, operates at the very highest end of factual TV. His company’s best-known titles include the David Attenborough-fronted series Galapagos 3D, Natural History Museum Alive, Conquest Of The Skies and the recently commissioned BBC One three-parter, Great Barrier Reef. Atlantic’s portfolio also includes Time Scanners, which uses 3D laser-scanning technology to explore the inner secrets of iconic structures such as the Coliseum, the pyramids and Petra; and Inside The Commons, which explores the inner workings of the UK Parliament.

High-end productions like Galapagos are “harder to pull off” than some dramas, Geffen says. “Give HBO good scripts and it can produce a lot of great dramas. But it can take four years to make a factual six-parter.”

Geffen has positioned Atlantic at the cutting edge of production technology, embracing everything from apps to 3D. While 3D has yet to catch on in the living room, he says the company’s 3D output, delivered via a specialist division called Colossus Productions (a joint venture with Sky Television), does very well in the theatrical market. And while 4K has stolen 3D’s thunder, he believes the arrival of glasses-free 3DTVs will breathe new life into 3D home entertainment.

Having identified virtual reality as another emerging opportunity, Geffen launched a new company called Alchemy VR, which has already begun developing projects with VR manufacturers including Oculus Rift and Sony’s Morpheus. “It’s a way to reach a younger generation that isn’t necessarily watching factual on TV,” he says.

Geffen adds: “I think the landscape is changing in favour of high-end, expensive documentary. I think audiences are craving well-made, real programming, not the fixed world of reality TV.”
And digital is also creating opportunities, he says: “Whenever I go to an appliance store and see the latest HD, 3D, 4D TV sets, they always show an endless loop of documentaries for demonstration purposes. This tells me that, the better the rate of definition and display rate become, the greater the need for genres such as wildlife becomes. In addition, the VOD market is beginning to diversify. Special interest portals and communities are finding doers, for example, on themes such as the underwater world, the Cold War, espionage, or socially relevant themes that interest them.”

Interestingly, Burkerson rejects the thesis that viewers’ attention spans are becoming shorter: “On the contrary, they are becoming longer, more intensive and much deeper, since the user consciously determines the content he or she wants to see and doesn’t just occasionally glance at the screen.”

National Geographic Channels International’s executive vice-president and head of international content — and a speaker at this year’s MIPDoc — Hamish Mykura, challenges the notion that high-end factual is somehow suffering from the new narrative techniques that it has employed to stay competitive — the perennial dumbing-down argument. “For many years, I’ve been listening to people talk about the end of quality factual programming whenever a new idea comes along,” he says. “But I think all of the new approaches have refreshed the genre, making it more diverse and interesting. People who hanker for some past era of traditional documentary are getting it wrong in my view.”

For Mykura, science on Nat Geo’s family of channels has benefited hugely from accessible series such as Brain Games, Street Genius and The Science Of Stupid: “These are entertaining shows that deliver a lot of science content to audiences, but not in the form of a school-type lecture. Their format is also such that it can be viewed on clips online.”

Nat Geo still has slots for high-end factual programming, Mykura adds: “But the challenge everyone faces is that we are all operating in such a crowded digital world. Single films can get lost in the noise, which is why there has been a shift towards series that introduce entertainment and character elements, or some other kind of hook to engage the audience.”

One example is Survive The Tribe, in which survival expert Hazen Audel lives with remote tribes in locations such as the Arctic, the Amazon and the Kalahari. “It’s entertaining,” Mykura says, “but it also introduces the audience to anthropology.”

Anniversaries of events are also a way to deliver serious scientific subjects. “We built a season of programming around the 10th anniversary of the Asian tsunami last year,” Mykura says. “That was powerful, people-based programming, but it looked at subjects such as the seismology of continental drift.”

**CURIOsITY REDISCOVERED**

JOHN Hendricks, founder of factual TV leviathan Discovery Communications, has just resurfaced at head of a new subscription-on-demand service for factual programming named CuriosityStream.

The ad-free platform, which went live in the run-up to MIPTV, airs a mix of library shows and original commissions. Its first three original titles include Big Earth Picture, a 20-part 4K series that captures visual wonders from around the world; Deep Time History, which traces great people and events from history; and Digits, billed as a “comprehensive history of computers and the internet.”

Hendricks says: “I have long dreamed of a content-on-demand service that uses advanced media to empower the enduring human desire to understand the universe and the world around us. CuriosityStream is the world’s first ad-free, SVOD service that addresses our lifelong quest to learn, explore and understand. Our aim is to provide the first and best on-demand destination that aggregates and curates the world’s best factual content.”

CuriosityStream launched with around 800 titles. In addition to original content, it has picked up long-form shows from companies including ZED, Flame Distribution, Terra Noa, NHK and BBC Worldwide. It has also mapped out a short-form strategy that consists of two parts. First, it will conduct about 20 interviews a month to produce segments featuring influential thinkers such as Deepak Chopra, Sheryl WuDunn and Michio Kaku. Second, it will debut two original short-form series in 2015: A Curious World, which will explore everything from ancient engineering ‘eats to sleep cycles; and Destination Pluto, which will examine the New Horizon space mission.
Pioneer Productions — one of the first companies to enter the extreme-weather genre (Raging Planet; Wonders Of Weather) — used a range of techniques on its award-winning series In The Womb. Created for Nat Geo and Channel 4, the show combined real-life footage, captured using specialist filming techniques, alongside VFX and prosthetics to portray the world of babies before birth.

“One area we think is very interesting right now is live events,” says Pioneer’s managing director, Kirstie McLure. “We’re in paid development on a project that will have some exciting science in it.” The beauty of live is two-fold, McLure adds; it can provide broadcasters with the kind of event programming they crave; and it can be used to attract audiences to digital platforms ahead of the telecast itself.

McLure says factual has nothing to fear from the advent of digital media: “We have a YouTube channel called Naked Science that is doing a great job of reaching younger audiences and rekindling their interest in science. We see digital as a way of introducing younger audiences to the genre and giving us a chance to bring them back to the television.” The co-production model has played a key role in enabling factual TV to continue raising standards. “We are producing a three-part series called Treasures Of The Earth for Nova in the US and KBS in Korea, working alongside PAAN Media in Korea,” McLure says. “This is our first co-production with Asia and we are learning a lot about Korea’s extraordinary CGI talent.”

On the issue of thematic channels airing more drama and reality programming, McLure believes change is coming: “I think we’re going to see the major channels going back to brand. Audiences want to have more certainty about what they are going to get when they visit a factual channel.” This assessment seems to chime with developments at Discovery Channel in the US, where president Rich Ross has hired former HBO executive John Hoffman as executive vice-president of documentaries and specials. While part of Hoffman’s brief will be to develop scripted series, the appointment also signals Ross’ intention to shift the channel away from sensational shows and pseudo-science. Speaking to journalists at the end of 2014, he made it clear that the channel would be turning away from productions like Megalodon: The New Evidence, Finding Bigfoot and Eaten Alive, and focusing more of its efforts on “authentic” documentaries. That’s a message that will go down well with factual aficionados.