Expensive, but worth it

A great documentary can perform the same tent-pole function for a broadcaster’s schedule as a great drama — which is why demand remains strong for best-in-class factual content, writes Andy Fry

When digital media started to fragment TV audiences, there were fears that factual filmmakers would struggle to find adequate funding for high-end documentary productions. But the reality is that there are still numerous channels around the world that see blue-chip factual content as a crucial part of their programming line-up. Echoing the situation with drama, an outstanding documentary film or series can act as a schedule event that cuts through the clutter. Among the most committed supporters of blue-chip factual programming are public broadcasters, whose remits demand they find room in their schedules for natural-history, history, culture and science shows. But if you look around the international market, you will also see plenty of pay-TV and SVOD platforms prepared to invest in quality. And it doesn’t end there. From commercial distributors to not-for-profit organisations, there are dozens of players willing to share the financial burden of getting amazing shows into production. The challenge, of course, is that factual filmmakers invariably have to pull blue-chip budgets together from a number of sources. While there are some occasions when global pay-TV channels such as Discovery or National Geographic will fully fund productions in order to air them across their various global feeds, a more typical scenario will see international partners club together to fund a co-production.
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A classic case in point is Hidden Kingdoms, a BBC Natural History Unit production that involved the BBC, BBC Worldwide, France Televisions, CCTV China and Discovery as partners. Then there is Congo – Deep And Dangerous, a recent wildlife production that brought together Doclights/NDR Naturfilm, Blue Planet Film, NDR, ARTE, ORF, WDR and National Geographic Wild.

These are not isolated instances — which is why MIPTV and MIPCOM are so important to the dynamics of the blue-chip factual sector. On the one hand, the Cannes markets allow producers to open up a dialogue with potential co-production and pre-sale partners. On the other, they are the perfect setting for distributors to sell completed documentaries, thus recouping the heavy upfront investment that such programming requires.

A good example of a co-pro alliance being formed in Cannes came at MIPCOM 2014, when BBC Worldwide and NHK announced a new deal to make Wild Japan, a 4K documentary series that explores the untamed regions of Japan. A three-partner, the production is due to air in late 2015/early 2016.

A similar partnership was formed at MIPTV 2015 when ORF Austria, CCTV10 China, ARTE France and ZDF Germany came together behind Sky Rivers Of The Himalayas, a 3 x 52 mins series that will be delivered in early 2017. Produced by pre tv, DreiDat and EOS Films, the 4K production tells the story of the river that flows through every climate zone on Earth and shapes the lives of more than a billion people. Known by a variety of names, including Yarlung, Tsango, Brahmaputra and Jamuna, it rises in the Himalayas and ends in the Bay of Bengal.

While a lot of deals are initiated at MIPTV and MIPCOM, blue-chip factual series are such massive undertakings that the Cannes markets can also play a key role at various stages of their development-to-distribution life cycle. At MIPCOM 2014, for example, filmmaker Yann Arthus-Bertrand gave delegates an early glimpse of his epic project Human, which premiered on France 2 in late September. Earlier this year, meanwhile, PBS, the BBC and BBC Worldwide formed an on-going pact to create 20 hours a year of factual programming specials. Now BBC Worldwide is at MIPCOM to promote one of these titles: Skyworlds, a 3 x 50 mins production from the BBC Natural History Unit. The ground-breaking wildlife series will look at flight as the ultimate superpower, using cutting-edge technology to follow animals into the skies and fly alongside them.

BBC Worldwide is also promoting titles that were introduced at MIPTV 2015. These include The Hunt, a series from Alistair Fothergill (Planet Earth; Frozen Planet) that explores the dramatic world of predation. Other key titles include Atlantic and Shark, the latter described as “the definitive series of shark natural history”. A three-part co-production between the BBC and Discovery, Shark employs the latest 4K and high-speed camera technology to film behaviour that has never been seen before. The first two programmes are wildlife films made by world-class underwater teams. The third film highlights the work of the leading shark scientists researching these mysterious animals.

The beauty of co-production is that different partners can end up taking different roles depending on the project and their skillset. So in one scenario, a partner might be the producer but, in another, it could come on
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board as distributor. PBS, for example, has no role to play in distributing Skyworlds. But PBS International will be in Cannes with an interesting slate of HD titles, including Giraffes: The Forgotten Giants and Walt Disney. The latter is a 4 x 54 mins production featuring rare archival footage from the Disney vaults, interviews with biographers and historians, and the animators and designers who helped to turn Disney’s dreams into reality. Billed as an unprecedented look at the man who built a media empire, the series will show how Disney came to have such a profound influence on family life. Given the importance of the Cannes markets, all the factual TV sector’s heavyweights are present in some capacity. Japanese public broadcaster NHK, for example, arrives at MIPICOM with a strong slate of high-end factual programming. One of its top titles is Leaps In Evolution, a 4K co-production with France Televisions and Curiosity Stream in the US. Using cutting-edge CGI and pioneering research into DNA, the ambitious series seeks to trace the origins of life on Earth all the way back to its beginnings four billion years ago.

Among other titles, NHK is bringing Origins Of Land, The Great Asian Highway and The Pacific War In Color. For the latter, NHK has collected Japanese films shot during the four years of the Pacific War, which give a rare insight into how people lived. Using current technology, NHK has also been able to bring back the colours of this fascinating era. Like the BBC, NHK prides itself on the use of technology as a way of pushing back the boundaries of factual television. In Ring Of Civilisations, it is using 4K, 8K and aerial laser scanners to generate new insights around historical marvels such as Angkor Wat and China’s Terracotta Army. In Deep Ocean, meanwhile, it displays an underwater filming prowess previously seen in Legends Of The Deep: Giant Squid.

ARTE sales, the distribution branch of the French/German broadcaster, also has a wide slate of shows on offer at the market. Among the one-offs dedicated to personalities are Buster Keaton: The Genius Destroyed By Hollywood; Alain Delon, A Unique Portrait; Warren Beatty, Hollywood Ambition; and The Worlds Of
Philip K Dick. Also on ARTE Sales’ slate are Egypt’s Modern Pharaohs, an exploration of Egypt’s contemporary history (3 x 52 mins); The Silk Road (15 x 26 mins); Tree Stories (5 x 52 mins); and Jesus And Islam (7 x 52 mins). New documentary one-offs tackling contemporary topics include The Disappeared, an Invisible War, Quest For The Perfect Athlete; The Artificial Womb; and Inexorable Anorexia?

Another broadcaster-distributor that invariably attracts interest in Cannes is Germany’s ZDF Enterprises (ZDFE). Among its key titles this October is How Climate Made History, which looks at how extreme weather conditions had a role to play in the rise and fall of the Roman Empire, the Thirty Years’ War and The Renaissance. It will also present Human Limits, which looks at people with extraordinary skills that go beyond what is ordinarily deemed humanly possible; and The Secret Garden, a wildlife special that reveals the many small creatures that go unnoticed in a typical family garden.

Other key titles showing the range of ZDFE’s slate include Mammoths: The Giants Of The Ice Age and WWII In The Pacific. Featuring rare footage, often shot by the troops themselves, the latter tells the story of a war fought across vast stretches of ocean that would pioneer new forms of combat.

Pay-TV players including Discovery, National Geographic and A+E come to MIPCOM as buyers, sellers and co-producers of factual programming. So it is no surprise that the market is also buzzing with independent producers and distributors. A leading light is Atlantic Productions’ CEO Anthony Geffen, who is taking part in a MIPCOM panel entitled The Blue-Chip Legacy: Aspirational MegaSession, during which he will discuss some of the awe-inspiring co-productions with which his company is involved.

Among the titles being presented by Atlantic is David Attenborough’s Great Barrier Reef (3 x 60 mins). From the team behind First Life, the series uses pioneering camera technology and draws on the latest research to investigate the reef. It employs satellite scanning to show the 2,300-kilometre expanse of living coral, and revolutionary macro lenses to capture the reef’s tiniest life forms. Underlining the appeal of high-calibre programming to commercial distributors, Great Barrier Reef will be sold by eOne Entertainment outside the US and Australia, where the rights have already gone to the BBC and ABC Australia.

Also on Atlantic’s slate is four-part political documentary Inside The Commons. Shot over 12 months, the filmmakers were given unprecedented access to the inner workings of the UK’s House of Commons. The series goes to the heart of British democracy and asks if a parliament founded 750 years ago is fit for purpose in the 21st century. Atlantic holds the worldwide rights to Inside The Commons, excluding the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

Other indies at MIPCOM include Earth Touch, which is debuting Drain The Titanic and Drain The Bermuda Triangle, both of which are one-hour specials. Produced by Mallinson Sadler Productions and Northern Sky Entertainment, Drain The Titanic uses cutting-edge technology to create a realistic, detailed model of the shipwreck as if it were on dry land. Drain The Bermuda Triangle, meanwhile, investigates the strange natural phenomena that occur within this 500,000 square mile expanse of the Atlantic Ocean, and explores features including the eight-kilometre deep Puerto Rico Trench, the submerged Bahamas Canyon and the sweeping Abyssal Plains.

Blue Ant Media is in Cannes with 100 hours of new content, including 4K productions such as Baby Animals (7 x 30 mins) and Great Blue Wild. The former shows animals on the road from birth to adolescence and adulthood. From Arctic foxes and sea otters to tamarin monkeys and red pandas, it gives animal lovers a
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up-close look at new-born life.

There is also a strong wildlife theme to Zed's slate, which includes new in-house productions Lion Queens: Fighting For Survival, The Kill In African Dry Zone and Growing Up A Chimp. The last follows a young orphan chimpanzee as she learns the basics of survival in the wild. Balancing out the Zed slate are some high-end history titles. After Hitler, produced by Cineteve and recently acquired by National Geographic Channel, explores the reality of the post-war years, while Hitler Versus Churchill: The Eagle And The Lion (Roche Productions) tells the story of the two giants whose battle dominated the 20th century.

Producer/Distributor Kwanza, meanwhile, has 40 hours of new high-end documentary titles on its slate. Among them is Creating An Ocean (2 x 52 mins), which follows the three-year-long construction of the world's largest aquarium. Other priorities include Charlie Hebdo: Terror In Paris and Dolphins: The Sea People. The latter is a primetime 4K doc for CBC and France 3, in which a British athlete whose life was saved by dolphins travels around the world in an effort to understand more about the smartest creatures on Earth.

As the above productions show, natural history, history, science and culture are all alive and well in the international factual market. But one area that has come to the forefront recently is survival and adventure. An interesting addition to this sub-genre is Pilot Productions' Tough Boats (6 x 52 mins). Produced in HD, each episode focuses on a boat journey to one of the most challenging environments on earth and looks at how the technology of boat travel has been adapted. Journeys include crossing Borneo from East to West, exploring the Bangladesh delta and navigating the Amazon from Peru to the Atlantic.

The technology behind how stuff works continues to be a big draw for buyers. One eye-catching title in this arena is Survival In The Skies (3 x 60 mins), which explores the breakthroughs, turning points, triumphs and disasters that led to the invention of the space suit, the ejector seat and the parachute. US cable channel Smithsonian greenlit the series from indie producer Arrow Media. It is being launched at MIPCOM by TCB Media.

And, of course, factual continues to excel in telling compelling human-interest stories. Examples at MIPCOM include Looking Glass International's documentary series The Eccentrics, which discovers and follows the most original and eccentric people on the planet and charts their exceptional lives. Also of interest is TVN Poland's heart-wrenching film The Ghost People, which tells the story of Tanzania's tormented albinos.

Finally, and not to be forgotten, there are significant moves by Netflix and Amazon to build up their factual coverage. Netflix's decision earlier this year to partner Leonardo DiCaprio on the creation of documentary and docu-series was a firm indication that blue-chip factual content has a place in the new TV landscape.