Leading channel buyers share their shopping lists and reveal the challenges of multiplatform rights acquisition.

By Steve Clarke

How do you seize viewers’ attention when the competition for audiences keeps on growing? That is one of the critical questions European buyers were asking themselves as they weighed their priorities in preparation for MIPTV.

Local television businesses are being transformed as the streaming giants, principally Netflix, continue to make broadcasters and platform owners across Europe nervous. This is especially true in a dynamic and hyper-competitive TV environment like the U.K. Even pay-TV giant Sky has been forced to introduce a new, more cost-effective à la carte viewing menu to keep customers sweet and minimize cord cutting.

For distributors, the good news is that the demand for content has never looked keener. This is particularly true of scripted shows that can be streamed in single episodes or watched as boxed sets. In other ways, too, the fear of Netflix is altering the market for rights.

“The streaming services are competing for the same shows as us,” explains Sasha Breslau, the head of acquired series at British broadcaster ITV. “As we all know, some of the shows at last year’s L.A. Screenings were presold to Netflix and Amazon.”

WINDS OF CHANGE

With a new senior management team in place and Brexit-induced confusion causing uncertainty in the British advertising market, ITV is keeping a close eye on its costs. One casualty is the pay channel ITV Encore, which is being re-invented as an online-only, boxed-set service.

“In the past, I bought Nordic noir for Encore and other high-end, foreign-language shows for the channel,” explains Breslau. “But overall, her MIPTV shopping list remains extensive. ‘In all genres, there is a bountiful supply of content across both scripted and non-scripted,' she says.

At the market, her priority is to keep ITV’s portfolio of digital channels competitive. Last summer, ITV2 was the subject of intense social-media buzz when it experienced a surprise breakout hit in the form of homegrown reality show Love Island. At MIPTV, Breslau would like to balance the schedule by finding more scripted fare for ITV2, notably comedy.

“I am trying to reinforce and consolidate ITV2’s reputation for great American comedy. We already have Family Guy, American Dad and Two and a Half Men, which in the last six months performed very strongly,” she points out.

FACTS OF LIFE

For female-skewing ITVBe, Breslau is hunting for glossy, fun reality shows that can sit alongside the Real Housewives franchise. The channel’s sweet tooth is well known by certain distributors. “Cake Wars has done well for us. Anything involving cakes, desserts, chocolates, sweet, but they’ve got to feel contemporary. In the last 12 months, I’ve passed on some of them because they felt a bit old. And they’ve got to have long runs.”

Plastic surgery, motherhood, home improvement and glamorous makeover series are also on ITVBe’s radar.

ITV4, meanwhile, is in the market for high-volume factual entertainment likely to prove popular with men. The channel’s staples include Pawn Stars, Storage Wars and
**U.S. procedurals continue to be popular across Europe, with shows like CBS’s SEAL Team landing on Sky in the U.K. and TNT Serie in Germany, among others.**

**Counting Cars.** Breslau knows only too well that free-to-air rivals backed by U.S. firms like Blaze, which was launched in the U.K. by A+E Networks in 2016, are direct competitors.

**RISING TIDE**

The U.K.’s Channel 5, owned by Viacom, has recently increased its audience share, according to ratings compiled by the London-based BARB service. “Alone among regulated U.K. broadcasters, we are putting on share,” says Katie Keenan, Channel 5’s head of acquisitions.

“We have such a huge range of channels to buy for. There’s so much content we screen at MIPTV and we’ll think, ‘Well, this could fit on SSTAR or our new channel, SSELECT.’ I am looking for a diverse and eclectic range of shows for all our channels.”

On the main network, Channel 5, the return of sitcom Will & Grace has been a winner, but other broad-appeal, high-volume scripted shows are needed for the station. Meanwhile, USA is seeking crime procedurals, SSTAR wants series that can sit alongside such fare as Dance Moms, and the upstart SSELECT needs drama and factual. The majority of SSELECT’s content includes upscales shows that have already played on Channel 5. “We’re showing things like World War II in Colour on SSELECT,” notes Keenan.

In continental Europe, Jörg Graf, COO of program affairs at Mediengruppe RTL Deutschland, makes the point that securing first-run series is more important than ever. Consequently, output deals have gone out of fashion.

“People won’t watch dross anymore, they want original shows,” he insists. Not that he has any complaints regarding the quality of American shows, despite the trend of locally produced drama outperforming acquired content.

“We’re not buying less, but we are buying differently,” he says. “At MIPTV, we’ll be looking for non-scripted and formats. But on the other hand, you never know if there will be a good drama. If it’s a good offer, we will consider it.”

RTL Group–owned VOX, which recently celebrated its 25th anniversary, now ranks among the top tier of German channels. “The schedules on Monday, Wednesday and Friday evenings used to have a lot of U.S. drama,” Graf says. “We’ve dropped them and are running domestically produced shows, including a German version of The Red Band Society, which doubled our market share.”

Last year in Germany, RTL increased its lead over rival ProSiebenSat.1 Media. But Rüdiger Böss, executive VP of group programming acquisitions at ProSiebenSat.1, remains bullish. He highlights the success of Young Sheldon. “It’s our best-performing new comedy in the last 17 years. When the show launched, it achieved a share of almost 26 percent and [has stayed] at around 18 to 19 percent.”

While this prequel to The Big Bang Theory has been a hit, at MIPTV Böss is seeking “fresh blood in comedy and drama.” High on his agenda are “easy” shows, such as procedurals featuring self-contained stories resolved in a single hour-long episode, and a strong medical drama.

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The Starz original Counterpart, distributed by Sony Pictures Television, has been a strong performer for MTG in the Nordics.
Similarly, Anette Romer, the head of acquisitions and formats at Denmark’s TV 2, will be eyeing drama at MIPTV. British drama that can play successfully on TV 2 Charlie is on her radar. “We continue to see a shift away from U.S. series to European drama, particularly U.K. titles,” she says. Meanwhile, TV 2 Fri and TV 2 Zulu need factual entertainment, and entertainment and comedy, respectively.

The final season of the Danish drama Norskov performed strongly for the broadcaster, as did the stripped 24-episode pre-Christmas family drama Tinka’s Christmas Adventure. In non-scripted, a parenting show based on Twofoot’s Happy Families: The Farm, making its debut; and Farmer Wants a Wife all stood out.

“Together with Location, Location, Location, these factual—entertainment titles perfectly fit Danish viewers’ continued interest in everyday issues and the day-to-day agenda—housing, health, cost of living, education and parenting,” says Romer.

At the Stockholm-based MTG, Jakob Melldhede, executive VP of programming and content development, has shows that engage the emotions at the top of his MIPTV wish list.

“I’m looking for feelings. Viewers can choose from so many films and series across so many platforms, we only remember the content that makes us feel something. As long as that criterion is fulfilled, I am bringing a very open mind to this year’s MIPTV,” he declares.

Recent breakout hits have included Counterpart (the first episode was directed by Norway’s Morten Tyldum), S.W.A.T. and Absentia. “These are very different shows and attract very different audiences, but they get all the essentials right,” Melldhede says. “When you tell a story in a unique way through interesting characters and a sharp script, usually everything else falls into place.”

The growth of MTG’s streaming service Viaplay means Melldhede is casting his net wider than ever. “We have every type of viewer you can imagine,” he says. “It’s a serious business, keeping everybody happy. As long as it’s good, people today are ready for pretty much anything.

On-demand creates so much freedom, both for us and for our customers.”

This point is not lost on Sarah Wright, the director of acquisitions at Sky. The platform’s U.K. streaming service, Now TV, has given the pay box another winner—and a way of responding to the challenge from Netflix and Amazon. It curates hundreds of boxed sets.

“I am very pleased with the rise of the streaming services because we’re part of it,” she says. “It’s different services for different customers at different times in their lives. Acquired content is a key part of Now’s offer.”

Wright adds, “Sky’s customers love acquisitions. I recently spent time with some focus groups. They told me we have the best of the U.S. and beyond at Sky. That’s why they subscribe.”

Game of Thrones remains a huge show for Sky Atlantic, while on Sky 1, The Simpsons continues to help drive the schedule. Of late, Sky Arts has made a splash, thanks to its Passions series. The strand has featured left-field takes on a range of English writers, including Jane Austen and the controversial, politically incorrect poet Philip Larkin.

Such is the demand to feed the Sky content pipeline that Wright and her team now buy throughout the year. “MIPTV provides an opportunity to reconnect with the market,” she explains. “We might see the small- to medium-sized distributors there. We discuss all sorts of projects. We’re in that golden age of scripted shows.”

That, of course, is true. But buyers struggle to secure all the rights to scripted content in an era when catch-up platforms are essential to everyone who runs TV networks.

PLAYING CATCH-UP

“We rarely buy stand-alone nonlinear rights,” says TV 2’s Romer. “Catch-up, in addition to clearing linear rights, is a must. We consider it to be an integral part of the deal. Subscribers to TV 2 Play expect to be able to find titles for preview or time-shifted viewing. Stacking is
crucial to drama titles, but each deal is distinct and we have to fight every single case.”

Romer’s comments strike a chord with Breslau at ITV, who notes, “All distributors are keen to retain stacking rights because they can extract secondary value from them.”

She was pleased to obtain series stacking rights for the comedy Ghosted at last year’s L.A. Screenings, but that deal was the exception rather than the rule. “Distributors can window these rights to SVOD services,” adds Breslau.

But as a free-to-air network, ITV can exist comfortably without stacking rights, unlike Sky, whose subscribers expect flexible viewing opportunities.

“Sometimes we may buy a show as a boxed set only,” Wright says. “Or we might buy a show for Sky Store across all the territories. We’ve always acquired a broad set of rights because we utilize them.”

MTG’s Mejhede is adamant that stacking rights are crucial in today’s environment. “As a viewer, I am going to get much more from a new season if I’ve had the chance to dig into earlier runs.” Earlier this year, the latest season of the rebooted The X-Files and every previous season were made available to viewers via a mix of free-to-air channels and subscription platforms. “We want deals that allow us to do that,” he stresses.

**WINDOW WATCHING**

In Germany, ProSiebenSat.1’s Böss highlights the value of securing a catch-up window. “We need 35-day catch-up rights,” he says. “We are addressing that with all of our licenses. They are very helpful and see that the market is changing. It’s an essential part of our strategy.”

But complicated rights deals stretch budgets. “I never have enough money,” says Böss. “Our budgets are not decreasing, but there are a couple of players out there with deep pockets. It’s a very competitive market. We have to spend our money cleverly.”

At Sky, there have been hints from CEO Jeremy Darroch that the company is earmarking more cash for acquired shows. Wright declines to elaborate. “We have a programming budget. We work out where it’s best spent depending on the projects. I would never rush to buy a show I didn’t think was right for us.”

ITV’s Breslau indicates that overall license fees are on the rise, but there are a lot of dramas that distributors can’t shift. “If you look at the L.A. Screenings for the last three years, you’ll see a lot of shows that haven’t found a home in the U.K.”

In other words, buyers know that, once again, there will be a lot of drama waiting to be sold at MIPTV. But what, if anything, is missing from the market? “There is too much attention on scripted,” says Sky’s Wright.

In common with several other buyers, she still hasn’t given up hope of finding the next big entertainment hit—“a brand-new format that knocks everybody’s socks off.”

If a successor to The X Factor, Strictly Come Dancing and The Voice is turning out to be elusive, too soon to show and at the hard-to-reach audience of 16- to 24-year-olds. “They are the hardest shows to find,” says Channel 5’s Keenan. “That audience is very picky, and they spend a lot of time away from TV sets watching on other devices, but as Love Island proved, find the right show, and that audience will come to it. We have successfully served that audience many times across our channels, but in terms of content targeted at that demographic, there is a lack of programming.”

TV 2’s Romer has a different perspective. “No genres are missing from the market—it is more the thirst for original, groundbreaking ideas,” she says. “Or new takes on existing stories. It is refreshing when developments like ‘true crime’ blow fresh air into crime.”

But perhaps the last word should go to MTG’s Mejhede, who pinpoints the contemporary audience’s lack of patience in an on-demand era. “First episodes are fast becoming a genre in themselves,” he says. “The competition is so tough you need to hook viewers straight away. Think of it as a pilot for a series that’s already been made. It’s a genre like all the others, and there are so many ways you can bend the rules. Just don’t forget the emotion. Don’t make me wait to feel something. Get me right from the start.”