It is generally acknowledged that we are in a golden age of scripted TV. But less well documented is that factual TV is also going through its own creative renaissance. Andy Fry reports.

Titles such as Making A Murderer, Jinx, Zero Days, Of: Made In America, The Story Of God, Planet Earth II and Great Barrier Reef have all contributed to the impression of an international factual community operating at full throttle.

Paul Cabana, executive vice-president and head of programming at A+E Networks’ History and H2, says: “History Channel has made headlines with scripted series like Vikings recently. But we have a number of premium documentary series and events coming up in the near future that represent a really nice range of tone and content.”

Highlights include The History Of Superheroes (working title), a film from Morgan Spurlock that explores the cultural backdrop to the rise of Marvel and DC: Age Of Terror (working title), a look at the factors behind the rise of organisations like ISIS; and The Human Journey (working title), the story of migration over the last 70,000 years.

While these are quite distinct subjects, Cabana says “the thing that unites them is that they all feel like stories that must be told, which is one of the real strengths of the factual genre. All of these titles either involve great storytellers [like Morgan Spurlock], or benefit from new information that has come along. In the case of terror, recent world events have prompted a desire for context. With human migration, it’s a combination of subject relevance and new DNA technology that allows us to explore the fundamental forces that set mankind in motion.”

Get the ingredients right “and you have stories that are as compelling as fiction”, Cabana adds. “I think we’ll see more of them in our portfolio because there is demand for them. But it’s important to realise I’m not just talking about shows that have premium production values. They are just as likely to be premium in terms of insight, access, subject, point of view, auspices or research. What the audience is really craving from factual is something they’ve never seen before.”

He cites the example of 60 Days In, an A&E series about a group of individuals who volunteered to spend 60 days undercover in prison to gain evidence of questionable or illegal activities.

Of course, “never seen before” does not mean you cannot revisit a subject — it just means you need to approach it in a fresh way. The BBC, for example, is poised to present Planet Earth II, a sequel to 2006’s landmark natural-history series Planet Earth.

BBC Natural History Unit creative director and executive producer Mike Gunton says: “We were keen to do this series because the world has changed in the last 10 or 20 years. But advances in technology also means it has become possible to tell stories in a new way. The original Planet Earth looked at the world from a god-like perspective, but this is more about the drama of individual animal lives. We still get to see the great habitats of the world, but this is a more personal approach to storytelling.”

In many ways, Gunton says, Planet Earth II deploys
the techniques that have made scripted TV so popular. "The challenge we have as natural-history filmmakers is that it takes a lot longer to get from concept to delivery with a high-end factual series than it does with a drama — maybe four or five years. But we have evolved the way we do things to take advantage of scripted TV's strengths. Our animals have become characters engaged in recognisable challenges, such as bringing up babies. This adds a poignancy and relevance that viewers respond to."

Making the animals into characters also makes it possible to tell new stories under the Planet Earth franchise, Gunton adds: "For example, we look at the city as a habitat, exploring how some animals have adapted to take advantage of the expansion in urban areas."

The idea that factual has borrowed from drama comes up a lot. But it is only one reason for the genre's current success. "I think factual TV producers are also learning ways to make their shows stand out in a competitive landscape," says Derren Lawford, creative director at Woodcut Media, which is backed by Bob & Co. "We co-produced Mandela, My Dad And Me with Idris Elba's Green Door Pictures and Shine North. The film followed Idris while he was filming Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom while also coping with the sudden death of his father. Now we are working with Idris again on Cut From A Different Cloth, a documentary which looks at Superdry's attempt to launch a premium fashion line."

The inclusion of a renowned actor such as Elba brings with it the benefit of buyer name recognition. "But we also discovered something else," Lawford adds. "When you search for Idris Elba's movies on Netflix, Mandela, My Dad And Me also comes up, showing how promotable elements can help your production stand out from the rest of the competition."

Like Gunton, Lawford says one of the biggest challenges with making a great documentary series or one-off is that it can take a long time to produce — one reason why the number of high-end factual titles lags behind drama. "Great documentaries like Making A Murderer are predicated on amazing access, which isn't easy to get," he adds. "So most factual production companies can't survive simply by focusing on high-end projects. But the positive message these days is that you can be as bold as you want with factual, in the same way as drama producers."

Simon Andreae, CEO of Naked Entertainment, has played a key role in the recent reinvention of factual TV, working at Optomen Television, Channel Four, Discovery Channel and Fox before setting up his own company. The titles with which he has been involved include everything from Hell's Kitchen and Naked And Afraid to Emmy-nominated The Story Of God with Morgan Freeman for National Geographic Channel.

"The factual TV business has learned a thing or two from the pharmaceuticals industry," Andreae says. "It has realised that it isn't enough just to offer people intellectual nourishment and expect them to swallow it — you also need to give them attractive packaging. Factual television needs to be presented in an unmissible, magnetic way. It has to be delicious and good for you." This, Andreae adds, is part of the reason that celebrity has become such an important part of the high-end factual arena. He cites Discovery's Curiosity and Nat Geo's The Story Of God, "The Story Of God was such a success because Morgan Freeman really engaged with the project," he says. "It was a serious exploration of religion mixed with a star-driven travellingogue."

Echoing a point made by History's Cabana about the meaning of the word "premium", Andreae says that a big change in the business is that it is no longer possible to make simple distinctions in factual between high-end and populist productions. "Our 'make-under' show 100% Hotter has a populist feel about it, but it deals with a serious issue — young women disguising themselves with make-up and accessories because they are scared to reveal what's underneath. You can take a
tabloid approach and deliver broadsheet nourishment.”

David Royle, executive vice-president, programming and production, at specialist factual broadcaster Smithsonian Channel, agrees that key players in the genre have learned to play the marketing game better: “We try to play off the popular zeitgeist. We’re always trying to work out what subjects are coming up that will interest people, or whether there’s some kind of anniversary we can hook an idea to.”

Recent examples include Million Dollar American Princesses, a show about the American heiresses who married into the English aristocracy. Smithsonian Channel established a link between this show and drama hit Downton Abbey by getting actress Elizabeth McGovern to tell the story.

“We also have a new project called In Search Of The Real Jesus Of Nazareth,” Royle adds. “This will coincide with the 40th anniversary of Franco Zeffirelli’s iconic movie Jesus Of Nazareth. The star of that film, Robert Powell, will explore the story of Jesus for us over four hours.”

One possible problem for factual TV is the number of real-life subjects that are now being reinvented as dramas rather than being produced as documentaries. However, Royle says this can actually work to the genre’s advantage: “The thing that a good factual series offers is the truth. So when viewers see a drama they like — for example, Deutschland 83, which is set during the Cold War — their next step is often to look for a factual series.”

Royle says stylistic innovation is also helping factual to stay fresh: “Tom Jennings put together a superb film called MLK: The Assassination Tapes, which is based around a treasure trove of footage he found in a Memphis library. He took clips, radio and photos created in the run up to Martin Luther King’s assassination and reconstructed them into a film. There’s no narration and no new elements added, but the result is spine chilling.”

One other factor that has helped factual TV maintain its freshness and innovation is that it is not as restricted as drama in terms of the source of its ideas. While the international drama market still tends to be dominated by a handful of territories, high-end factual ideas emerge from all over the world. The German-speaking territories, for example, are home to a number of leading factual players, including ZDF and ORF. ZDF’s commercial arm, ZDF Enterprises (ZDFE) is at MIPTV with factual series including The Desert Sea, The Celts: Blood, Iron & Sacrifice and Children Of The Wild, which investigates whether a child can grow up all by itself, surrounded only by wild, ferocious animals, in the way that Mowgli did in The Jungle Book.

Another global force in factual is Japanese public broadcaster NHK, whose senior producer of international co-productions, Sayumi Horie, says: “We are experiencing success with our high-end documentaries. One example is a three-parter that revealed new truths about the Lockheed bribery scandal in 1976. This was one of the greatest political and economic scandals involving both the US and Japan, and it brought down the then prime minister of Japan. NHK’s in-depth investi-
gation brought out a string of unknown facts on what happened behind the scenes.”

Other high-end factual series involving NHK include Russia’s Golden Mermaids, a look into why Russia’s synchronised swimming team is so strong. In part, this is about the grace of the swimmers, but the programme also provides a scientific analysis, Horie says: “Using the latest 4K technology and science investigation, the doc not only beautifully captures the swimmers’ performance, but reveals for the first time ever the oxygen consumption in their muscles and brains, and how their bodies have evolved to gain an ability only aquatic mammals have.”

Also of interest is The Body: Miracles Of The Inner Social Network, an eight-parter coming out in 2018. “Until now, we have been taught that our brain and heart are the control centres of our lives,” Horie says. “But the latest medical research tells us that, in fact, the crucial key to life is the dynamic exchange of information between our organs and cells. Combining 8K/4K UHD microscopic images and 4K CGI, The Body visualises the complex yet delicate interaction of organs within the body.”

Echoing her peers, Horie adds: “4K, unique access, amazing CGI and dramatic reconstruction are all important elements [of high-end factual]. But on top of that, what captures viewers is the dramatic adventure-like thrill of not knowing what’s going to happen next and the excitement of being taken to an unknown world.
Our new series The Great Amazon is an example of that. It’s a look into the most remote areas of the Amazon, with viewers taken on a hunt to find rare fish and monkeys.”

Choice of subject matter is dictated to some extent by local experience, Horie says: “We have recently been experiencing unusual typhoons, strange weather and frequent earthquakes in Japan, so we are producing a great number of doc series along these lines. We just started airing Mega-Crisis, which looks at how our weather and earthquakes will change with the continuing global warming, and the impact it will have on both the world and Japan.”

We are also now producing a series, Geo-Japan, which is an ambitious science project that will visualise in full HDR the spectacular and drastic changes that our country has undergone over tens of millions of years, and look at how the Japanese archipelago miraculously came about. Docs on this subject always get very high ratings, which means that viewers are keen to understand what is going on.”

The range of broadcasters interested in factual also means the genre benefits from pooled resources and shared expertise. “International co-production helps us produce high-end docs,” Horie says. “It provides us with an extra budget and also creative co-operation with partners who share the same mission. Life Force 3 is an example. NHK and NHNZ, both known for creating high-end natural-history films, joined forces to employ breath-taking 4K cinematography and cutting-edge computer graphics to visualise the science behind evolution.”

Continuing this theme, ZDF Enterprises is also showcasing a high-profile documentary project called Big Pacific. A rich cinematic vision of the world’s largest ocean, the 4K series is a co-production from NHNZ, PBS and CCTV9 that also involves ZDF, ZDF Enterprises, Discovery International, Channel 9 and ARTE as participants.

NHNZ managing director Kyle Murdoch describes Big Pacific as the most important series NHNZ has ever embarked on: “Not only is it our most ambitious project to date, but it’s also about a region close to our hearts — the Pacific is our backyard and everyone involved with the production has a connection with this body of water. Our shooters were in their element and have managed to capture unique behaviour.”

Gerrit Kemming, CEO and founder of Berlin-based distributor Quintus Media, says factual is benefiting from a growing number of buyers around the world. “Competition is rising in a number of key markets, with new channels in territories such as Poland and Germany,” he says. “That’s good news for series in our catalogue like Behind Bars: The World’s Toughest Prisons and Giant Constructions.”

Kemming reports demand for “exciting, immersive factual TV that makes great use of 4K, access, graphics and new production approaches, such as drone cameras. It’s not clear yet how factual TV will fare as audiences shift to on-demand, but I anticipate another good few years.”