A clearer view

Consumer adoption of 4K Ultra-HD displays is at an all-time high — as is the production of content capable of doing justice to the new technology, and the number of channels dedicated to airing it. Chris Forrester looks at some of the spectacular Ultra-HD programming available at MIPTV.

ANY broadcasters see 2017 as being the tipping point for Ultra HD (UHD). The hard facts are unassailable: data crunchers at IHS Markit say that, globally, 32% of all TVs shipped in the pre-Christmas quarter were 4K units — up 18% on the same period a year earlier. Some markets performed even better: North American sales of 4K sets stood at 35%. Western Europe performed even better at 36%. In China, more than half (52%) of all sets shipped were 4K. But when you look at larger sized units of 40 inches (101.6 cm) and above, which is the natural territory for UHD, the figures are dramatically more impressive: Japan comes in at 61% of units, North America 50%, Western Europe 52% and China 66%. Even the financially strapped Latin American markets averaged 29%. As Paul Gray, principal analyst for consumer devices at IHS Markit, says: "It’s an incredible acceleration of 4K TV uptake. It’s clear that a tipping point has been reached. It will soon be unthinkable that large-screen TV sets will not have 4K resolution."

Analysts at FutureSource Consulting say UHD as a home entertainment format has firmly planted its stake in the market, with strong growth evident from software to hardware adoption. Another research company, Strategy Analytics, has extensively surveyed the US market for its UHD prospects and, in a March 2017 report, reports that the majority of respondents plan to purchase a TV that is bigger than the one they currently own. "As awareness of 4K increases and the amount of available content rises, interest in having a 4K TV has also increased," the Strategy Analytics report concludes. As fast as consumers are buying into the technology, the UHD channel count is also rising. Eutelsat is already enjoying plenty of client enthusiasm for UHD and, while satellite has been pioneering the distribution of these new channels, there are also consider.

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Alexander Coridass

Helping these developments are the establishing and fixing of agreed transmission standards. Both broadcasters and distributors need common standards, and the electronics industry has certainly stepped up to the plate in supplying consumers with displays that reflect these latest agreements. Also important is the fact that the 'gadget' TV-support industry is also now able to handle UHD, and this includes the likes of Google's Chromecast, Amazon's Fire and Roku.
For the past three years, Sony has used MIPTV and MIPCOM to demonstrate to broadcasters and buyers that the content-production community is increasing its UHD output. While many broadcasters have initially concentrated on high-profile sports, there are also those that are now expanding their portfolio of UHD channels to widen the appeal of this latest revolution in broadcasting excellence.

Last MIPCOM, buyers were able to see the BBC’s amazing Planet Earth II in UHD. At MIPTV, the Sony 4K Ultra HD Theatre is screening some truly spectacular examples of the programming. A case in point is Germany’s ZDF Enterprises which, together with NHNZ and co-producers PBS, CCTV9, ZDF, Discovery International, Channel 9 and ARTE, is showcasing Big Pacific (4 x 60 mins). The groundbreaking series, which explores the mysteries of the planet’s greatest ocean, was wholly shot in 4K/UHD.

“Mankind aims to travel to Mars, but how much do we know about our own planet? How much do we know about the biggest and deepest ocean on Earth? Big Pacific will showcase the fascinating beauties and mysteries of marine wildlife still to be explored,” says Alexander Cordass, president and CEO of ZDF Enterprises (ZDFE).

Ralf Rueckauer, vice-president of ZDFE.factual, and Kyle Murdoch, managing director of NHNZ, show UHD clips from the show today in the Sony UHD Theatre.

Japan is at the forefront of 4K/UHD production and public broadcaster NHK is using MIPTV to display its latest UHD output. Titles include Gaudi’s Message (1 x 49 mins), which tells of the building of Gaudi’s unfinished masterpiece, the Sagrada Familia church in Barcelona, Spain, which is now scheduled to be completed in 2026 — more than 140 years after it was started. The film focuses on the Nativity Facade, which was completed in December 2015. It was a Japanese sculptor, Etsuro Sotoo, who was assigned to create the six gates in the Nativity Facade’s final stage. Without any blueprints or even clues left by the master architect, the documentary asks how Sotoo succeeded in channeling the passion of Gaudi. In stunning 4K, the film unveils the architect’s message by
FEATURING

Gaudí's Nose, a UHD documentary from NHK

Capturing the moment of the Facade’s completion, along with never-before-seen images of Sagrada Familia.

NHK is showcasing its latest drama and science/factual output, which includes 8K Super Hi-Vision shown in UHD. On offer are a Cosmic science tour, 4K-quality VR footage and clips of NHK’s latest visit to Antarctica to film a sub-glacial lake in 8K High Dynamic Range (HDR). NHK is also screening clips from Black Hole, a co-pro with Smithsonian and Windfall.

Yesterday Japan’s Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) updated MIPTV delegates on its latest UHD road map, having already begun testing the technology.

Next year will see a considerable increase in UHD content available to viewers. Then, in 2020, Japan will embrace 8K in readiness for the Tokyo Olympic Games.

Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS) and its TBS Vision production arm has supplied high-quality programming to Japanese viewers for more than 60 years. TBS Vision has been working with domestic and international partners on award-winning productions for much of this time. Now it is generating UHD (and 3D) entertainment, including a compelling portfolio of 4K footage captured at many of the world’s great heritage sites.

INsight is already transmitting UHD programming across Europe and North America, and continues to invest in high-quality unscripted reality and action-led programming. Its latest offering, No Time To Lose, sees nine ‘social influencers’ sent out on an adventure across South Africa from the sub-tropical plains of the Kruger National Park to the spectacular coastline of the Western Cape. The slowest competitors in each stage will be eliminated. The ones who make it to the finish in Cape Town will compete in a thrilling final challenge to win the competition and a €10,000 prize.

INsight has also wrapped production of its Photonis Ultimate Forces Challenge. Shot in UHD on Bali, the military-style extreme-sports show will make its debut on April 18 on platforms including Vodafone Portugal and Spain, Swisscom and Russia’s Tricolor TV. Rian Bester, CEO of Teri International/INsight, says: “The fact that the whole show is shot and broadcast in UHD only adds to the beauty and drama of the locations and scenes.”

INsight also worked with MIPTV to present yesterday’s Super Session, at which industry leaders shared their thoughts and plans as to how they intend to expand their services to include UHD choices.

France-based C4K360, already well known for its Clubbing TV programming in UHD, is now offering extreme sports, gaming/gameplay, lifestyle, e-sports, concerts and festivals in native 4K, as well as many other premium UHD titles.

Along with sports, most experts agree that event TV is also having a major impact on UHD viewing. Musical events, whether giant arena shows, spectacular opera productions, intimate jazz sessions or classical concerts, are well suited to both UHD and, increasingly, HDR. One concert features the compelling concert pianist Khatia Buniatishvili captured in HDR. Panelists are showcasing examples in all these musical styles, including the growing popularity of live transmissions to cinemas and theatres, in a Music & Culture session today at MIPTV.

An Italian panel on Wednesday, drawn from Mediaset, RAI and CTV Centro Televisivo Vaticano, update delegates on their plans for UHD. Each broadcaster is already investing in original content for the format. Last year, Vatican City TV captured in UHD the historic Holy Door ceremony at St Peter’s Basilica in Rome.