OTT Gets REAL

Mansha Daswani hears from production and distribution executives about how new players in digital—from global streamers to VR platforms—are impacting the documentary space.

For the last five years, at least one of the Academy Award nominees for best documentary feature has been a Netflix original. This year, the global streamer finally won home the top prize with Icarus, a film about the Russian sports doping scandal. The Sundance Film Festival winner was scooped up by Netflix last year for a reported $5 million—the kind of figure that you don’t usually see for acquisitions in the factual space.

Those high-profile festival purchases sit alongside buzzy series such as Making a Murderer and the upcoming blue-chip doc Our Planet on Netflix. Ditto at Amazon, which licensed the SVOD rights to I Am Not Your Negro and took a big swing with The Grand Tour. And those are just the general-entertainment platforms. Add to the mix services like CuriosityStream, which was founded by Discovery pioneer John Hendrick. And it’s clear that digital services are slowly beginning to transform the fortunes of companies operating in the documentary and factual space.

“The earliest big successes for most of the OTT subscription services seem to have come through drama,” says Jamie Lynn, executive VP of EMEA distribution at FremantleMedia International. “They’ve been the godsend of serialized drama. We’ve all been very curious to see how they could expand beyond that. Many of them are still trying to figure out what is the best way to proceed in this area. I don’t think they’ve found the silver bullet yet. However, there’s been a big upswing in contemporary documentaries and series” on OTT services.

FESTIVAL FORTUNES

For Walter Köhler, the CEO of Terra Mater Factual Studios, “the big platforms have ignited a renaissance in feature docs. In recent years the results at the box office were minor, even if you made an Oscar-winning feature doc. For major feature docs like our The Ivory Game—where one of the reasons to produce the film was to have a strong political impact—online platforms are unrivaled. When The Ivory Game was released by Netflix, an audience of nearly 120 million subscribers worldwide [could access it] at the same moment.”

Köhler notes that OTT platforms are beginning to commission their own factual productions, but argues that producers need to be aware that it’s a “completely new kind of business. Producers’ habit of saying, ‘Give me the money and I’ll do something nice for you,’ won’t work with Netflix, Amazon and company. You have to risk a lot of money, but if your film is compelling, then your reward can be super big.”

Ralf Rückauer, VP of unscripted at ZDF Enterprises, stresses that digital platforms “only create a handful of originals in the factual area, whereas each single ‘traditional’ broadcaster and the many pay networks have an annual program output that is a hundred times bigger. There are only a few rare opportunities for production companies” with OTT platforms, he says, which results in “a mixture of excitement and enthusiasm and a bit of frustration within the factual community.”

PLAYING THE SLOTS

Rückauer adds, however, that program-makers, freed from the restrictions of traditional doc channel slots, can explore different forms of narrative on digital platforms. Moreover, he notes, “there is greater demand for serialized content that resonates with the audience’s binge-watching needs. For example, we recently co-produced Hitler’s Circle of Evil for Netflix with our independent British production company, World Media Rights. This is a perfect match to meet the needs of VOD partners and their audience.”

FremantleMedia’s Lynn argues that topical shows can sometimes be more of a challenge on online platforms. “[David] Letterman’s new Netflix experiment was designed to be less topical, to have a shelf life,” says Lynn of My Next Guest Needs No Introduction with David Letterman, a monthly talk show. “But is there a chance we may start to tune in close to live? Are [OTT platforms] going to be able to create must-see television in a nonlinear environment? It’s a different value offering. We’re all trying to figure out how that will work.”
LEANING IN
ZDFE.unscripted’s Rückauer is of the opinion that online platforms in the U.S. are more interested in “serialized and entertainment-driven formats,” while those in Europe prefer “specialist factual,” notably wildlife, science and history. “Generally speaking, I do not see much difference between pay networks and VOD platforms anymore—with maybe one exception. It looks like the VOD audience is much more ‘lean forward.’ People are starting to watch political, critically acclaimed documentaries or cultural, high-brow content. People care much more and want to educate themselves and are more curious and they’re watching more intellectual programs. At the same time, with platforms not having to meet a specific time length, this provides a big opportunity for feature-length, cinematographic, author-driven programs on mostly pay networks, which pubcasters hesitate a bit more to greenlight.”

FremantleMedia International has done a broad range of deals with streaming platforms, covering everything from early seasons of Project Runway to Jamie Oliver programming, Grand Designs and the doc series The Traffickers. “A lot of what we’ve done has been more in the catalog space after the shows had some linear exposure around the world,” Lynn says. He adds that there is indeed an appetite for first-run—and global—from the streaming services, but notes, “When we’ve weighed up an option of a global deal on one hand or individual distribution opportunities on the other, for the most part, we have opted for the individual approach. We’ve done individual SVOD deals around the world with the likes of iflix, Showmax and others.”

Outside of commissions and catalog sales, digital platforms are also creating opportunities for short-form content. ZDFE.unscripted’s Rückauer explains that this a tricky business, one the company got into years ago and has since abandoned. “We anticipated that the digitization process in the

A/V industry would become an initial spark for shorter content and that people would watch clips on their mobile devices on a daily basis. This scenario came true. What we did not anticipate is that everybody can produce programs on his or her own these days. ZDF Enterprises’ concept with short content, contumix, couldn’t compete with quickly produced, user-generated content shot on a smartphone at home. Platforms have a demand for shorter content, while educational institutions and print magazines have or are looking for adequate add-on products for their equivalent online pages. The other side of the coin is that distribution processes are the same, whether you sell a 72-episode series or a 100-clip package, but the price point per episode is of course very different. Same with material delivery processes and accounting and everything you do when you sell a program. These processes generate work and costs, no matter how long and expensive the license fee per episode is. So we decided in 2013 not to continue our contumix business any longer. It just was not efficient enough.”

What producers are doing, however, is creating short-form clips from longer-form storytelling to use as marketing tools.

“We make short-form videos from our factual programming and news-related materials and share them with online platforms such as Facebook,” says Sayumi Horie, the head of the global content development division at NHK. The Japanese public broadcaster also has a dedicated online destination, NHK 1.5ch, for its short-form videos.

GOING VIRAL
“When we started the campaign for the world premiere of our feature film Brothers of the Wind—which starts in America in June—we put out a viral clip of an eagle chasing a mountain goat,” says Terra Mater’s Köhler. “It generated over 20 million hits. But we are not producing exclusively for short form.”

VR and AR are other avenues for doc producers. The verdict is still out on how transformative they will be for the entire factual landscape. NHK has been successfully deploying VR projects, Horie notes, referencing one about Egyptian pyramids and another that took viewers inside the Fukushima nuclear reactor. “We are also trying to include VR in the actual TV programs for the viewers,” Horie adds.

“I haven’t seen any feature storytelling in VR or AR,” Köhler observes. “They are superb little marketing tools for big narrative titles and they will become more important, but the real business in VR is gaming.”

Rückauer says that ZDF Enterprises has done a fair amount of research in this area. “We developed outstanding programs which received many prizes and a lot of awareness. And we are proud to have sold them to many platforms and clients. But what we learned from our internal study is that VR and AR are very attractive for producers and the gaming industry, but less so for distributors like us. This content is so branding- and marketing-driven and not specialist/factual.”