Unusual partnerships

While international co-productions are now firmly established as a way of financing factual programming, new types of deals with a diverse range of partners are emerging, bringing with them ever-more ambitious projects. Andy Fry reports.

These days, the factual TV market is dominated by character-based entertainment series, lifestyle shows and reality/observational documentaries. But alongside these schedule stalwarts, there's still demand for the kind of high-end specialist factual series that make audiences gasp in wonder. The challenge, of course, is how to pay for such spectacles, which typically focus on natural history, history, science or culture. Once you've factored in the cost of location and research trips, archive, dramatic reconstruction, CGI, expert advisors and set-piece experiments you are looking at a budget that is at least three to five times bigger than a regular series — without a comparable increase in audience to show for it.

The tried and tested solution to this financial conundrum is co-production, and the good news is that there are still plenty of organisations willing to hammer such partnerships into shape. “We're still very committed to factual co-production because it enables you to put some amazing, ambitious programmes on the screen,” Mark Reynolds, director of factual at BBC Worldwide (BBCWW) says. “Some of these projects have such high budgets there's no way a broadcaster could afford them by itself.”

He cites the example of Hidden Kingdom, a natural history series that uses state-of-the-art camera technology...
to reveal the world from the perspective of animals such as chipmunks, shrews and dung beetles. Filmed in a wide variety of locations, the programme is a co-production between the BBC, Discovery, RTL, France Televisions and CCTV-9. It was subsequently sold by BBCWW to broadcasters including Network Ten Australia, SVT Sweden and RUV Iceland.

While co-production is fundamental to getting projects like this made, this doesn’t mean that all of the contributing financial partners have to make do with a one-size-fits-all production, Reynolds says. “The beauty of factual co-production is that you can create bespoke versions for the different partners. So the BBC’s version was a 3 x 60 minute series narrated by Stephen Fry. But in France and Germany they cut 90-minute versions because they wanted to create more of an event/movie feel.”

This flexibility is one reason why high-end factual productions continue to hold their own, Reynolds says. “A lot of channels have had success with character-based factual entertainment, but they still look for landmark event pieces that are tailored to their audience. Co-production is a way to make that possible.”

The companies credited as partners on Hidden Kingdoms are broadly typical of a high-end factual co-production. But there are a couple of names that should be viewed as encouraging signs for the future of the sector. Firstly, there is China’s CCTV-9, which has recently joined other public broadcasters such as the BBC, France TV, ZDF and NHK as an active co-production player. Aside from Hidden Kingdoms, CCTV-9 has also partnered BBCWW on series such as Africa, Wonders Of Life and Generation Earth. Outside this blossoming partnership, it has also been involved with NHK’s Life Force II and a project entitled The Story Of Australia. The latter, developed to mark 40 years of diplomatic relations with China, was a six-part series produced by Bearcage of Australia.

Also significant is the involvement of German commercial broadcaster RTL, not a name usually associated with this kind of content. Tracing the roots of the relationship, it’s noteworthy that RTL previously teamed up with the BBC, Discovery and France TV on two documentaries, Krakatoa: The Last Days and 9/11: The Twin Towers, which achieved a market share of 33.3% among the 14 to 49 age group. That success was enough to tempt RTL into Hidden Kingdom, a decision RTL executive producer Agnes Ostrop is delighted with. “This is the first time RTL Television has been involved in the production of a wildlife film,” she says, “and we are very happy to be part of this exciting project to reveal an extraordinary world.”

Japan’s NHK is another of the key players when it comes to factual co-production. Among the current projects is Human Life: Our Amazing Cells, a two-part science series with a German partner. “It uses images of living cells and CGI to explore how 60 trillion cells govern our lives,” Sayumi Horie, senior producer international co-production at NHK, says. There’s also Life Force II, another natural history co-production, involving NHK, NHNZ, CCTV-9 and Science Channel.

More unusual, perhaps, is a project entitled Dashi: The Essence Of Japan, a documentary that examines the history of dashi (a traditional soup stock) and how the Japanese food philosophy is rooted in nature. “It is a co-production between NHK, Asia Documentary Productions, Point du Jour, and ARTE France, and is a great example of a Japan-oriented idea that flourished into a universal story through development with our international partners,” Horie says. “We are now trying to work out a similar co-pro with French partners for a colourised archive documentary film entitled Tokyo Phoenix: 100 Years Of Destruction And Rebirth In Colour.”

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Sayumi Horie

Echoing Reynolds, Horie says financing is only one aspect of international co-production. “Our focus is always on combining creative talent and expertise so that the end product becomes stronger in its universal appeal. This is especially the case for NHK-initiated co-pros,” she says. “Balancing creative input from different partners is always a challenge, but if done carefully and sensibly, the partnership can achieve an amazing result for everyone, as was seen in our Giant Squid project (a co-production with Discovery Channel in association with ZDF and ARTE).”

In Horie’s opinion, international co-productions have another benefit that is not often discussed. “They are an excellent learning ground for directors and producers who are otherwise only accustomed to working with people from the same background. For many years, NHK has
CO-PRODUCTION SPOTLIGHT
Q&A with Tom Brisley, creative director at Arrow Media

What co-pros have you been involved in recently?
The biggest co-pro we are working on is Live From Space, for Channel 4 in the UK and National Geographic Channel. Although it has been an incredible challenge, with the added dimension that there are two live shows, one each for the US and UK primetime, it has also been the most rewarding project of my career. We are collaborating with NASA, broadcasting live from the International Space Station (ISS) and witnessing first hand the most extreme location humans inhabit, as the ISS travels at 17,500 mph and makes a complete lap of the Earth during each two-hour live show.

Another recent co-pro is Terror In The Skies, for Channel 4 and Smithsonian Channel in the US.

Why did you go the co-pro route and how has it worked out?
I am a big fan of co-pros. It is one of the best ways of creating big ambitious projects. The skill is in finding the right broadcasters to co-produce. For Terror In The Skies, Channel 4 wanted a presenter and Smithsonian Channel didn’t. As we knew this from the start, we were able to plan shoots accordingly. The result was two satisfied clients with the added bonus of both versions available for international distribution.

What is the key to a successful co-pro? And what are the risks?
The key is bringing together the right co-producers. There’s no point bringing two or more parties together if their editorial needs are miles apart — it’s a recipe for disaster, both in the edit and for future broadcaster relationships. Clearly there will need to be tweaks along the way, but it’s always best to drill down on these and plan for them as much as you can beforehand. Essentially, get the front end right and the risk of problems later on down the line is greatly diminished.

Are co-productions taking place between a broader pool of players?
I think co-productions have never been healthier or more diverse. Networks, cable and satellite broadcasters, international broadcasters, co-producers, pre-sales partners and countries with tax breaks, make co-pros a complex grid of possibilities. There is nothing more satisfying than finding a new matrix of partners and delivering exactly what they all want.

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Nikolas Huelbusch

strategically assigned its most talented in-house producers to international co-pros with an aim to enhance their cross-cultural communication skills and hone their competitive edge in the global arena. We have been doing so in science and natural history, but we are now trying to provide similar opportunities for producers and directors in arts, history, and culture.”

While NHK often takes the lead in projects, it is also happy to partner on projects initiated by independent producers and directors from around the world. “For example,” Horie says, “Colours Of Football is a project initiated by TAL (Televisa America Latina) and aims to establish a collection of football-related mini-docs from around the world in time for the World Cup football. In general, when ideas are initiated by other broadcasters/producers, we contribute editorial input only when we deem it necessary and beneficial to the project.”

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Like the BBC, NHK has a series of core partners that it talks to on an ongoing basis, including the likes of France Televisions, ARTE, ZDF, WGBH NOVA, Science Channel, NFB and Discovery Canada. But it is also on the lookout for new relationships. "NHK is moving into 4K and 8K production, so we are considering new partnerships with creators and content providers in the field of giant screen," Horie says. "Since we are a public broadcaster, we would be naturally looking for partners that have a strong sense of public values and educational purpose, e.g. museums, academic institutions, and schools. In light of the rapid expansion of the educational content industry, we would also like to explore the possibility of working with education service providers on platforms such as online and tablet."

Co-production also continues to play a key role in the way Germany’s ZDF Enterprises (ZDFE) finances factual content. However there are a few changes in modus operandi, according to Nikolas Huelbusch, ZDFE’s project manager of factual co-productions and development. "We are getting involved in projects at a much earlier stage then we used to," he says. "The advantage of this is that we can have more input into the factors that make a series more appealing to the international market. We can advise on what versions might be necessary and which experts or perspective will work best. It avoids a situation where we are distributing a show that has limited appeal."

Two projects that ZDFE is currently involved with are The Story Of Us: Europe, with indie producer Nutopia; and World In Motion, a series from Gruppe 5 which looks at the history of the world through movement. "World In Motion is a three-part series looking at migration, trade and armies — movements that have triggered world change," Huelbusch says. "It’s the kind of global topic you need if you are to attract co-pro partners."

Like his counterparts, Huelbusch says the best rationale for going down the co-pro route is to raise the creative stakes on a project. "But it will only appeal to broadcast partners if you have something unique to say or a new approach. It could be a new theory, a new camera technology or a new way of storytelling, something that will interest the audience."

While a lot of the key deal-making in factual co-productions involves discussions between public broadcasters and thematic channel operators such as Discovery, National Geographic and A+E, there’s also a parallel universe in which indie producers club together to try to get projects off the ground. "A lot of my time is spent talking to other producers about ways to secure the finance on ambitious projects," Alan Handel, president of Montreal-based producer Handel Productions says. "Recent examples would be Strip The City, a co-production with Windfall Films; Aliens: The Definitive Guide, a co-production with Arrow Media; and Tutankhamun Decoded, a co-production with Blink Films."

All of the above examples saw Handel team up with UK companies, a model that he says works well: "From a financial point of view, it means we are well-placed to target broadcasters in both the North American and European markets. So in the case of Aliens: The Definitive Guide, Discovery Canada, Science US and Discovery International aired the series while Tutankhamun Decoded was broadcast on History Canada, PBS and National Geographic International."

There’s also a creative consideration: "You can do a successful co-production with anyone. But Canada, the US and UK share a storytelling culture. This means that expectations are often similar and editorial styles are compatible. All of this can contribute to the smooth running of a co-production."

For Handel, getting things running smoothly is vital to a successful outcome: "My view is that early conversations with broadcasters and production partners about expectations are key. Most broadcasters know that co-production means putting a little bit of water in their wine, but clarity upfront ensures that everyone knows they are moving in the same direction. You then need to keep up the dialogue during production."

One company that specialises in smooth running co-productions is producer/distributor Off The Fence (OTF). Managing director, distribution, Bo Stehmeier says...

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there's actually a big opportunity for broadcasters in the pre-sale arena: "One thing we specialise in is getting broadcasters to buy into projects at a very early stage," he says. "This way they can use their acquisition budget to get something that closely resembles a home-grown production."

OTF is able to do this because it has both production and distribution expertise in-house, Stehmeier says. "We have executive producers who can speak the language of the broadcasters. So let's say we go to broadcasters with a project that is 40% financed. They can get involved early in return for some editorial input. In some cases, they might then line up local celebrity talent for the voiceover, so that they can then promote the show in the same way as an origination."

According to Stehmeier, this quasi co-pro model has become particularly useful since money got tighter in the TV system: "A lot of broadcasters have had to reduce staff and are working within tighter financial constraints. So we've been able to fulfil some of the functions that they would have managed before."

Current projects on OTF's slate include Your Inner Fish, from Tangled Bank Studios. "If there's one thing missing at the moment that I'd like to see, it's broadcasters paying a little bit extra to secure some equity in factual shows," Stehmeier says. "If they did that, they'd start to see some revenue accruing from the backend rights, and this could then help fund the production of further high-end factual."

In terms of overall trends, there's a general acknowledgement that the number of high-end factual projects has probably dropped slightly because of the growing trend towards long-running factual entertainment series. There's also increasing complexity in the rights arena thanks to the expansion of the US-backed thematic channels and the advent of digital players.

But BBCWW's Reynolds says there are still clear opportunities. "We're talking more to the new digital players like Netflix and Hulu, which are starting to move into factual, and we also see an opportunity in the growing market for fact-based dramas," he says. "We've seen the factual channels invest more in high-end dramas which are based on true stories. A good example of that would be The Challenger Disaster, which the BBC co-produced with Discovery's Science Channel. Projects of this kind are still subject to rigorous fact-checking but they are able to tell stories from a more personal perspective. So I expect to see continued strong demand for more of these."

This argument is echoed by ZDFE's Huelbusch, who has come on board for two English-language docu-dramas from Story House Productions, a company that has a foot in both the German and North American markets. "We are partners on Mammoth Outbreak, a what if? docu-drama, which looks at what happens when the body of a mammoth is exhumed and triggers a viral outbreak. We are also partners on World War A, which explores what would happen if aliens landed and started using our resources. This is a new direction for us but one that is in line with the kind of content that broadcasters are looking for."

Meanwhile NHK's Hori believes the creative rational for co-pro becomes ever stronger: "As societies become more inter-connected, we are faced with problems that require consolidation of knowledge, experience, and expertise. With the right partners, co-production can be a way to achieve that and create something that has lasting impact. This is why we feel co-production in the factual genre is so important. In today's world, it is vital to explore issues from various perspectives. Co-production can be a way to exchange thoughts and ideas and to enable us to find a better solution."

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