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April/May 2017

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Tel: +44 (0)20 7017 5000
e-mail: tbi@knect365.com **web:** www.tbivision.com

Printed in England by Wyndeham Grange Ltd, Southwick, West Sussex BN4 4EJ

Television Business International (USPS 003-807) is published bi-monthly (Jan, Mar, Apr, Jun, Aug and Oct) by KNect365 TMT, Maple House, 149 Tottenham Court Road, London, W1T 7AD, United Kingdom. The 2006 US Institutional subscription price is \$255. Airfreight and mailing in the USA by Agent named Air Business, C/O Priority Airfreight NY Ltd, 147-29 182nd Street, Jamaica, NY 11413. Periodical postage paid at Jamaica NY 11431. US Postmaster: Send address changes to Television Business International, C/O Air Business Ltd / Priority Airfreight NY Ltd, 147-29 182nd Street, Jamaica, NY 11413. Subscription records are maintained at KNect365 TMT, Maple House, 149 Tottenham Court Road, London, W1T 7AD, United Kingdom. Air Business Ltd is acting as our mailing agent.

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Franchise building

At the high-end docs are becoming big franchises and at the other end of the market lower cost franchises are being built around experts and on-screen talent. TBI investigates

Apocalypse The Battle for Verdun

Brands and franchise building are historically associated with movies and TV drama but in recent times have become common in the world of docs. “The key trend we see, and not just in history and wildlife, is docs constructed as brands,” says Eurodata TV research executive Candice Allesandra.

She cites French-originated *Apocalypse* is a prime example. Clarke Costelle & Co. made the original series *Apocalypse: the Second World War*, which performed well on France Télévisions and internationally.

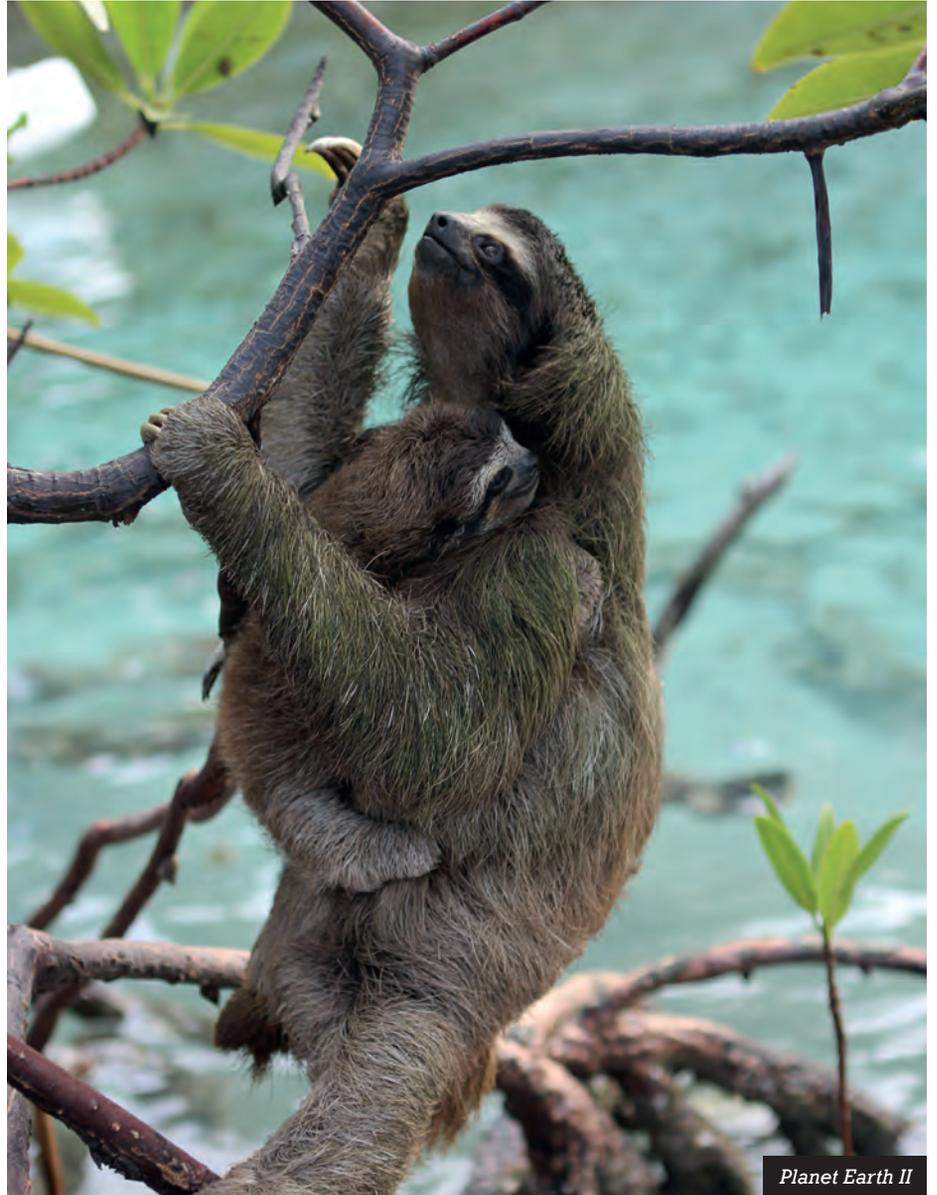
It has gone on to spawn *Apocalypse Hitler*, *Apocalypse Stalin*, *Apocalypse 10 Lives*, *Apocalypse World War 1* and now, two-parter *Apocalypse: The Battle for Verdun*, which FranceTV Distribution is selling. *Apocalypse: an Impossible Peace* is, meanwhile, in production.

“The producers have constructed a new brand and that’s something viewers can identify,” Allesandra says.

Planet Earth II and now *Blue Planet II* (see page 8) are other examples of blue-chip doc brands, but there are other ways of creating a doc franchise. “It can also help to have a famous host who embodies the subject, such as David Attenborough,” Allesandra says. “In the UK there’s also the likes of Lucy Worsley and Reggie Yates.”

The former’s numerous BBC shows include *British History’s Biggest Fibs with Lucy Worsley* and *Six Wives with Lucy Worsley*. Yates has fronted *Reggie Yates in a Texan Jail*, *Reggie Yates in the Mexican Drug War* and *Reggie Yates: Hidden Australia* (which has forced the BBC to apologise for misleading viewers after a funeral wake was allegedly misrepresented as a party). Presenter and journalist Stacey Dooley can be added to the list with her *Stacey Dooley Investigates* series.

The presenter-led franchise is not, however, just a UK phenomenon. In the Nordics, stage and film actor Ville Juhana Haapasalo has



Planet Earth II

fronted accessible docs for Nelonen and YLE in Finland and SVT in Sweden.

Technological innovation is also driving change in the doc world, with 4K and virtual

reality well suited to factual projects. Meanwhile, a divide is opening between the main SVOD platforms and the TV players.

“Digital players are less interested in animals and history and prefer to tell a contemporary story, such as Netflix with *Making a Murderer* or hostages series *Captive*, or Amazon’s Novak Djokovic doc *Novak*,” Allesandra says.

Not everything has to be big, she adds. “The trend we see is for either big, identifiable brands, or smaller docs with specialised subject matter,” she says. “These can be successful too, especially in regions such as Scandinavia, which is well known for making factual projects about societal topics, which are usually smaller and more local.” **TBI**



“The key trend we see, and not just in history and wildlife, is docs constructed as brands”

Candice Allesandra

VIEWPOINT

DERREN LAWFORD



How film talent got invested in docs

Actors have been more than doing their bit for documentaries for quite some time. Take Robert Redford, one of the driving forces behind Sundance Film Festival. In 2011, four out of five of the Oscar-nominated documentaries were Sundance films first. Then there's Tribeca, also driven by a Hollywood heavyweight in Robert De Niro.

What's new, though, is how invested major Hollywood actors are becoming in individual films and projects, motivated by a combination of factors.

For one, documentaries can give you an overtly political platform that your acting roles might not allow.

Leonardo DiCaprio's passion for environmental issues is well documented off screen, and he brought *Before the Flood*, executive produced by Oscar-winning director Martin Scorsese, to the big screen as a theatrical doc before it aired on National Geographic in the US.

Fellow Academy Award winner Geena Davis has been an outspoken critic of female portrayal in TV and film, which saw her set up the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. She's now teamed up with CreativeChaos VMG to produce an untitled feature documentary on gender disparity in Hollywood.

Unscripted programming can also empower actors and their fans to delve into cultural issues they might not otherwise explore. A

great example is Kevin Hart's two-hour special in which he will star and executive produce – *Kevin Hart Presents: The Black Man's Guide to History*. His audience is used to him making them laugh and no doubt he and the History cable net hope he'll do that and help them learn a thing or two along the way.

Then, of course, there are the unadulterated passion projects that actors are keen to be involved in. At Woodcut Media, we've been fortunate enough to work on two Idris Elba documentaries, which delve into his passion for music (*Mandela, My Dad and Me*) and fashion (*Cut From a Different Cloth*), both of which have been picked up by Netflix globally.

However, I must confess that as a producer, it's the films where fiction meets fact and life imitates art that you kick yourself for not having thought of.

Take Morgan Freeman's Emmy-nominated turn in *The Story of God*. The proposition is devastatingly simple and effective: "Watch the man who's played God explore God for real." It was so good, National Geographic has ordered a second series.

Here we see the actor working as a shortcut to big topics, very much like Di Caprio's next big factual outing, *Frontiersmen*, an eight-part extravaganza, again for History, which builds on his Oscar-winning performance in *The Revenant*.

You might have noticed the liberal sprinkling of the word "Oscar" and "award winner" in

this article, which is indicative of another factor driving the world of Hollywood actors and documentaries together: the TV industry's "pursuit of premium", propelled into overdrive by the likes of Netflix.

The SVOD services have positioned themselves as premium global platforms with big-budget drama, critically-acclaimed comedies and high-quality documentary acquisitions, and the bar for tent-pole shows has risen significantly across all the major platforms and TV networks with global reach. Discovery's *Idris Elba: Fighter* has certainly upped the ante for immersive docs.

These types of programmes are not without risk, and arguably the people most in danger are the producers themselves. Why? Because increasingly the investment of an actor in unscripted is as much a financial move as it is personal and professional.

Appian Way Productions, Green Door Pictures, HartBeat Productions and Revelations Entertainment, the production companies owned by Leonardo, Idris, Kevin and Morgan respectively, are all involved in the actors' factual films.

This means that inevitably there's an element of editorial control and financial gain that needs to be shared. From my experience this also has added benefits. When big names make documentaries for the small screen, there's always a danger that they can be seen as "vanity" projects. However, if the talent's company is involved and they're looking to ensue a return on their investments, then it's in the best interests of everyone that the narrative arc feels like more than a high-profile on-screen lark.

There's also no denying the marketing muscle a globally recognisable face can innately bring, and in the current climate, with docs having to work harder to punch through, a little star power can go a long way to enhancing the appeal of your film. **TBI**

What's new is how invested major Hollywood actors are becoming in individual films and projects... documentaries can give you a platform that your acting roles may not allow



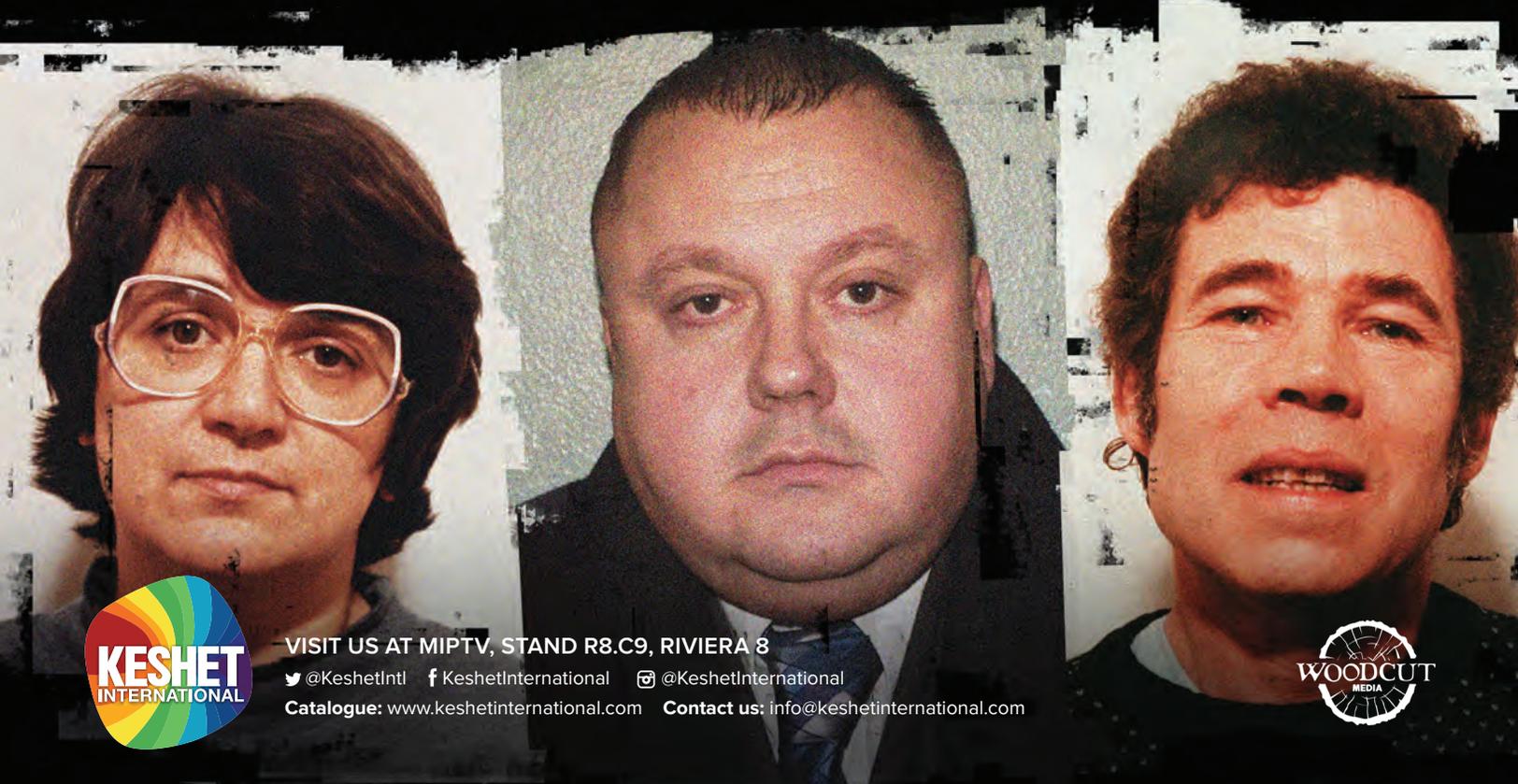
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CNN thriving amid Trump media assault

CNN boss Jeff Zucker claims the media is under assault and politicians are failing to address US president Donald Trump's attacks on journalists, but that his news network is thriving with political events driving record ratings and revenue. TBI reports

Speaking at an INTV session labelled 'The War on Truth', CNN boss Jeff Zucker told delegates at the Jerusalem-held event that while he wasn't planning to send President Trump a "thank you note", the increased interest in TV news "has been good for the bottom line". Recent events, and the reaction of CNN and others to them, have sparked a "renaissance of journalism in America", according to Zucker. "I actually think many of the news organisations in the United States have never done better work and more important journalism," he said.

"We've done an excellent job that I'm incredibly proud of," he added. "Our audiences are at an all-time high on television and our digital properties, and obviously that also accrues to the bottom line and is good financially."

In the INTV keynote was moderated by Israeli news anchor Yonit Levi. In it, Zucker said that the Trump administration's moves to restrict access to press conferences, as well as the regime's ongoing labelling of much coverage as 'fake news', was "dangerous and unprecedented".

CNN has been the subject of much of Trump's ire with its correspondents refused the opportunity to field questions and frozen out of events. Much of its output, along with that of many other news organisations, has been labeled 'fake news' and more recently 'very fake news'.

Trump has also indicated he does not support the sale of Turner-owned CNN's ultimate parent, Time Warner, to US telecoms company AT&T.

In an uncompromising response to the president's criticism, Zucker said that politicians have failed to stand up to Trump and defend the free speech amid attempts to "delegitimise many aspects of the American system".

"Many of them are afraid in general and afraid of Trump," he said. "Many of them have abdicated their responsibility in standing



Jeff Zucker and Yonit Levi

up for free media and freedom of the press. The two notable exceptions have been John McCain and Lindsey Graham, two Republican senators."

The CNN chief acknowledged his network had covered Trump's early rallies in depth and said he regretted giving the then presidential candidate so much unfettered air time. "It wasn't the best editorial call," he said. "If I could go back, I would do it a different way."

Zucker, who refused to answer whether he, or his journalists, has received threats in the wake of Trump's attacks, also spoke about his role in bringing the president to TV. *The Apprentice*, the reality show fronted by the president, launched while he head of NBC,

"Mark [Burnett] brought [*The Apprentice*] to us," Zucker said. "As a New Yorker, I understood the appeal of Donald Trump in terms of his ability to create publicity and a big commotion. I understood that with Donald Trump in the middle of it, even if it didn't work, it would get a tremendous amount of attention."

He went on to relate how after the success of the show, Trump has asked to be paid the

same per episode as the entire cast of NBC's ultra-successful sitcom *Friends* – about US\$6 million dollars – but then accepted a slight raise, putting him on under US\$1 million per episode.

The CNN exec also spoke about Trump alluding to getting him his job at the helm of CNN after recommending him to then-Turner CEO Phil Kent. He added that the last time he spoke to Trump was on December 2 last year, when the president called to complain about a guest on CNN.

Aside from talking about the tempestuous CNN-Trump relationship, Zucker talked about the future of his news net as it looks to exploit digital platforms and build upon last year's acquisition of Beme, a social media app created by YouTuber Casey Neistat.

CNN's millennial audience far eclipses that of Vice and BuzzFeed and other services that skew younger than CNN, whose average US viewer is 58-years-old, Zucker claimed. "Vice et cetera all do a really good job, but our millennial audience dwarfs them," Zucker said. "They wish they had the millennial audience we have." **TBI**



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Deep blue chip

After the ratings and critical success of *Planet Earth II* comes *Blue Planet II*. Stewart Clarke speaks to the producers and distribution bosses looking to make the latest natural history epic a global hit, 15 years after the original took viewers under the sea



Until February, the BBC's upcoming blue-chip series for 2017 was known as *Ocean*. But in the wake of the success of *Planet Earth II*, the aquatic series took a leaf from its land-based forbear and became *Blue Planet II*. With a huge investment at stake, capitalising on brand recognition from the original *Blue Planet* and *Planet Earth II* makes sense for all the partners who have sunk million into the watery epic. It wasn't always the plan to rename the new show, according to James Honeyborne, series executive producer. "No, we announced this as *Ocean*, but we were open minded and have always known it has the same scale, breadth and ambition as the original *Blue Planet* series," he says.

"It's 20 years ago that film crew went out to make the original, which aired in 2001. There is a generational gap and we have new stories to tell. If there is a principal selling point it is newness: new species, new places,

new behaviours filmed in new ways, and new technologies that allowed us to go to places we hadn't been to before and find animals we didn't even know existed."

Sir David Attenborough returns to narrate the new series, which will launch later this year and runs to 7x60mins, with episodes split across different habitats plus the now obligatory additional installment looking at the revolutionary filming techniques used, and the making of the series. BBC Studios' NHU will make the show alongside copro partners BBC America, WDR and France Télévisions.

As with *Planet Earth II*, which was originally titled *One Planet*, *Ocean* was renamed just as the BBC Worldwide's Showcase event in Liverpool began, with the commercial arm of the UK pubcaster selling the series internationally. "It is a key piece for later in the year," says BBC Worldwide factual chief Mark Reynolds. "We hope it can replicate the *Planet Earth II* success; the same ambition, and use of technology, is brought to bear."

Filming technology and the editorial approach have moved on since the original series, Reynolds adds. "Storytelling has changed," he says. "It's a balance between being true to the animals' behaviour and allowing the audience to engage with the emotional part."

Honeyborne agrees that production and editorial techniques have evolved since the first series. "Where possible we focus on individual [animals] now because it makes for more dramatic storytelling but is still true to nature. It's not dramatised but it is filmed as unfolding character pieces."

That helps bring in the younger viewers that broadcasters crave, he adds (see Factual goes Millennial on p12, TBI Factual). "New audiences and younger audiences are really important to us, and we have to find ways of reaching them," he says. "It has been a generation, and we hope this millennial audience will find a way to connect with life beneath the ocean waves through the stories we tell and the awesome big set pieces. The health of the oceans is at a tipping point, and falling in love with them is the first step in caring for them."

The series addresses the environmental issues, notably in the final episode, which homes in on the latest science. In terms of scientific knowledge, *Blue Planet II* contributes by showing the experts footage of new species and behaviour.

"We didn't just report new scientific stories, we're making the science and showing scientists things they didn't know happened," Honeyborne says. "There are 15 papers being prepared on stuff we filmed, and that feels like a new synergy between science and media, which is very exciting."

If the defining moment of *Planet Earth II* was the now legendary iguana-versus-snakes sequence, what scenes from *Blue Planet II* will light up social media? The early money is on a never-before-seen sequence that captures a fish leaping from the water to catch a bird, an event that was previously just a fisherman's tale but is caught on camera in the new series. **TBI**

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NHK's *Phoenix* to rise in Cannes

NHK will unveil a Japan-France copro about the rise of Tokyo at MIPDoc. The producers and distribution team tell TBI about *Tokyo Phoenix: The Rise of Modern Japan*

The Japanese capital of Tokyo is the world's most densely populated city and synonymous with fast-paced modern high-tech living. It has, however, been completely destroyed twice, once by a volcano and once by war. *Tokyo Phoenix: The Rise of Modern Japan* tells the tale of the city from 1905 onwards using never-seen-before colourised archive footage.

A coproduction between Japanese pubcaster NHK, French cultural net Arte and *Apocalypse* prodco CC&C, the series is being sold internationally by France's Terranoa. Buyers will get to see the doc at a special screening at MIPDoc.

The France-Japan link goes deeper than doc-financing and distribution. Although NHK has a vast collection of film, the historical footage used in *Tokyo Phoenix: The Rise of Modern Japan* was unearthed from various archives throughout the world, says Shinji Iwata, Director, NHK. "Some of the earliest images of Tokyo dating between the end of the 19th and early 20th century, were taken by French motion picture companies Lumière



CC&C is expert in restoration, a technique used heavily in its *Apocalypse* docs. "They are pioneers in the colourisation of black-and-white-film and it was an eye-opener for the NHK team," Iwata says. "Even in this computerised age, a large portion of the colourisation process is done by hand. Their

"Olivier Julien's intricate mission was to work from these images and to give a non-Japanese audience the keys to fully understand them," she says. "The 100 years period covered in the film was also a challenge, since we wanted to render the atmosphere and the inhabitants' state of mind for each pivotal moment."

With the Olympics headed to Japan in 2020, broadcasters are sure to be looking for programmes related to the Tokyo, which NHK had in mind when it made the Japanese version.

"In the years leading up to 2020, we expect there to be much attention and demand for stories about Tokyo," Iwata says. "We hope the programme will appeal to broadcasters from all parts of the world, as it is a universal story about modernisation and the birth of a megalopolis."

The NHK exec adds that looking back at the history of the city is an unusual perspective.

"When foreigners talk about Tokyo, they invariably use words like 'cutting edge', and 'futuristic', but seldom do they show interest in the past," he says. "The same goes for the Japanese: NHK had never produced a programme with an overview of Tokyo's history as the main theme." **TBI**

"In the years leading up to 2020, we expect there to be much attention and demand for stories about Tokyo"
Shinki Iwata, NHK



and Gaumont Pathé," he adds.

The producers also sought out privately owned collections for this project. "They discovered a broad spectrum of events and aspects of Japanese life captured in home movies," Iwata says. "*Tokyo Phoenix: The Rise of Modern Japan* is chock-full of images that even the Japanese had never seen before."

colour artists were sensitive to and responded to NHK's most detailed demands."

CC&C production manager Anne-Séverine des Longchamps says Iwata and his team uncovered a treasure trove of footage, and the challenge for director Olivier Julien was making the images relevant and accessible to an international audience.

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We're going on a millennials hunt

With *Planet Earth II* beating reality TV programmes to audiences – including those crucial, lucrative millennials – Emily Bright talks to natural history documentary producers and channels about how they're attracting new audiences

The BBC's seminal natural history documentary *Planet Earth II* beat *The X Factor* in the UK Christmas ratings stake last year, even among 16-34s, a clear sign that millennials, often maligned for short attention spans and superficial lifestyles, warm to blue-chip factual programming when it's great TV. The doc series' dramatic shooting style and state-of-the-art camerawork seemed to draw in new and younger audiences, and signalled a shift within the natural history programming sector.

A total of 12.26 million people viewed the first episode of the David Attenborough-fronted series, 40.9% of the TV viewing public, meaning it became the highest rating natural history documentary in 15 years. Its second episode, 'Mountains', was watched by 1.8 million 16-34-year-olds, compared to *X Factor*'s 1.4 million in the same week.

Anthony Geffen, CEO and creative director of Atlantic Productions and a regular collaborator with Attenborough, says the BBC Studios Natural History Unit series went above

and beyond the standard factual television. "It's a beautifully crafted series for a start, with the voice of Attenborough on top of it, music by Hans Zimmer, and amazing technology, but the point is it's doing more."

The influence of Attenborough, wildlife broadcasting's most well-known talisman, played its part, as did new filming and storytelling techniques.

Geffen says the entire genre is changing: "Now that the cameras and technology are going into the animal's perspective is really significant."



have had a minor impact on the Australian election, as citizens seemed to take the importance of the Great Barrier Reef into the voting booth. While only a small percentage dive on the reef, visitors flooded into 100-200 seat theatres ten times a day.

Geffen hopes to capitalise on the opportunity with millennials with Atlantic's *Mission Galapagos* on BBC One, as part of a three-part series which will air in early 2017. It features presenter Liz Bonnin taking part in a scientific expedition, exploring what conservationists are doing in the field. Atlantic was keen to push technological boundaries with the project, and worked with manufacturers to find new and innovative ways to capture wildlife from a different perspective.

Another UK-based prodco, Icon Films of the natural history production enclave in Bristol, has also focused on pushing the boundaries of new technology in natural history.

Harry Marshall, creative director of Icon, says this is because blue-chip programming is evolving quickly, much like the animals it aims to capture – and some of these changes are altering the demographics.

“Natural history filmmaking needs to obey the most important principle of natural history,” he says. “We need to evolve; we need to adapt to survive. You can't stay like you are, so evolution is the key to success.”

He gives the example of Icon's flagship blue-chip documentary *Savage Kingdom*, produced for Nat Geo Wild, which follows a pride of Lions in Savute, Botswana, likening the elements of the programme to the arcs of characters in high-end, epic television drama.

Marshall uses the specific example of a lioness, Matsumi, who oscillated between fearing her male mate, who killed her cubs, and seeking his protection as a parallel with HBO's swords 'n' shields epic *Game of Thrones*.

“Natural history tended to be self-censoring, but we decided we really wanted to push the envelope a bit more, and obviously *Game of Thrones* was the big series on HBO,” he says.

“I don't know why natural history feels that it should be in some way given diplomatic immunity not to chase ratings, and not to be as contemporary and zeitgeist as any other genre.

“We focused on the rise and fall of individuals, and the stories of power and betrayal, greed and hubris. You'll find all of those traits in *Game of Thrones*.”

After working with Attenborough on eleven projects, Geffen knows there's always drama in the natural world, and it's a case of working out the narrative and capturing it. New technology allows filming crews to capture never-seen-before footage and create new scenarios.

Geffen suggests that engaging audiences on multiple platforms is central to attracting younger viewers. He cites the example of Atlantic's *Great Barrier Reef with David Attenborough*, which was for UK broadcaster BBC One. “We worked flat out across some

of the social media platforms and on virtual reality, which bounced back to create a richer experience and greater ratings,” he says.

Diversifying through new platforms has helped to engage a new generation of conservation enthusiasts. Atlantic's 20-minute immersive VR experience of the *Great Barrier Reef* had a sell-out run at London's Natural History Museum, with lots of positive feedback from millennials.

Geffen suspects that the VR experience, which was also shown in Australia, may even



Furthering the sense of dramatic scripting, Marshall recruited Charles Dance, who plays arch overlord Tywin Lannister in *Game of Thrones*, as narrator. “He totally saw the parallels between *Game of Thrones* and *Savute*, and the same visceral life and death struggle for power,” says the Icon creative chief.

The documentary has since been commissioned for a second season, titled *Savage Kingdom II*, which will be launched at the end of this year.

Marshall says that the character development in season one makes season two a “richer” prospect. “It’s about development and depth, and that you can’t get in just clips that people pop up and watch on YouTube,” he adds.

However, there are certain, distinct characteristics of television viewing amongst millennials – Marshall claims “they’re snackers and bingers”. He says the middle ground is disappearing, and people either want an immersive box-set binge or a short ten-second

action clip such as of a lion being stomped on by a charging giraffe.

The binge-watching generation comes with perks, of course. The development of new players in the market with large budgets such as Netflix and Amazon, make original commissioning of natural history documentaries a more viable prospect – indeed Netflix has commissioned a four-year project, *Our Planet*, which comes from the team behind the original *Planet Earth* and debuts in 2019.

Natural history can attract the same kind of millennial audiences to the online streaming services, claims Marshall, making for a “very exciting prospect” for programme commissioners and producers alike. He says: “All of my colleagues are salivating at the prospect of being commissioned on Netflix or HBO Now.”

CuriosityStream is part of this new streaming generation. The two-year-old SVOD service specialises in science and natural history programming. Chief programming officer Steve Burns has a three-strand approach to content: using the newest technology to open up wildlife habitats to scientific discovery, hearing directly from wildlife photographers themselves, and adding blue-chip documentaries such as *Blue*

Planet and *Planet Earth* to the service, some of which can be watched in 4K.

One of CuriosityStream's most-successful documentaries is *David Attenborough's Light on Earth*, a natural history one-off focusing on the small creatures lighting up our oceans and forests. The science-based documentary is a coproduction with Terra Mater Factual Studios, Ammonite and the BBC.

Burns says *Light on Earth* allows audiences to see ground-breaking images through new technology and scientific knowledge. Through specialised high-speed cameras, thousands of times more sensitive than previous models, Ammonite producer Martin Dohrn and his team were able to capture previously unseen bioluminescent creatures such as fireflies.

There has been a clear rise in natural history subscribers on CuriosityStream, claims Burns, though the service does not currently break that down into demographic parts and doesn't give out subscriber numbers. Much like Geffen, he acknowledges the importance of new media platforms in changing viewing patterns.

"Mobile is increasing across the industry, certainly on our site, but we can be viewed on any format, including your big screen TV and your desktop," he says. "We're finding people who are watching us on all three of these platforms, so mobile's a very strong element."

Interestingly though, the highest percentage of CuriosityStream subscribers are still viewing natural history programmes on Roku, Apple TV and Amazon Fire TV, he adds, perhaps reflecting habits of an older audience.

Meanwhile, UK-based Barcroft TV specialises in engaging audiences through short-form documentaries across media platforms. Sam Barcroft, founder and CEO of the Barcroft Media Group, says: "Our company started as a news company, so a lot of the content we put up online are mini-documentaries, and that is because over the past few years the mobile phone has become the predominant way that young people consume content."

In this format, he says, it is easier to reach young people with shorter pieces of content. Short-form also has the advantage of economy: long-form works less well on advertiser-funded video-on-demand platforms such as YouTube.

Barcroft says that although his streaming service connects most often with younger audiences, it was not a conscious choice by the company to go after them: younger people just tend to have the time and inclination to watch



David Attenborough's Light on Earth

video content on their phones.

For Barcroft, image quality isn't everything, unlike many factual producers at the more expensive end of the production pile. "A lot of the content that we produce is shot in a news format rather than a blue-chip natural history format," says Barcroft. "We use a lot of user-generated content where you would say the quality is a lot lower than if it was shot professionally, but from our point of view, it adds an air of authenticity, which is really important to drive engagement."

Some still associate UGC content with teenagers' camera phones, but the reality is often far from it. The Barcroft Animals YouTube channel makes series such as *Wildest Animal Rescues* from NGO footage of medical procedures. The channel's most recent video was of a turtle injured by a propeller, which was filmed by aid workers and vets, and received a lot of engagement on Facebook.

The ubiquity of phone cameras nowadays is also creating opportunity. "If you add a television producer's mindset to great content, you can tell stories really well, and if you have the power of social media distribution on top of that you can share them across the world instantly," says Sam Barcroft.

With over 111,000 subscribers to its YouTube Barcroft Animals channel, the company incorporates clips from that platform into full shows. "We view it as a development incubator for long-form premium series," says Barcroft.

The latest project is a long-form version of *Snapped in the Wild*, and Barcroft hopes to

expand this incubator format to another show, *Cute as Fluff*.

However, the digital firm acknowledges the importance of longer blue-chip documentaries too. "*Planet Earth* is one of the things that made me happiest in recent times in our industry, because it's shown that wonderful creativity mixed with amazing real moments in natural history still has a huge audience," says Barcroft.

That said, he notes that these productions cost a lot of money, so there is room for Barcroft Animals to exist besides BBC Earth, Nat Geo Wild and Animal Planet.

Even at the high-end, execs note that, comparatively speaking, the genre is not as expensive as dramas, especially those such as *Game of Thrones*.

Natural history programming, like the wildlife it represents, is constantly adapting and evolving in order to survive and capture new audiences. When Vice Media chief Shane Smith spoke at the Edinburgh International Television Festival earlier this year, he summarised what was behind the hipster brand's success in capturing millennial audiences, pushing the boundaries and updating the format, but actually using relatively traditional subject matter.

"We changed our brand from a hipsters' bible talking about rare denim, cocaine and supermodels to doing environmental programming, social justice, women's issues, and, of course, music... And guess what? Our business grew. Our audience exploded. We made more money, which is good because more money means more content." **TBI**

LAST WORD

THOMAS VINER



Factual TV in a post truth world

A couple of years ago, this would have been more of a eulogy than a state-of-the-genre address. Not now. As reality starts to fade and scripted takes over a bigger and bigger part of the landscape, specialist factual is actually enjoying a resurgence. Maybe because it has a tendency to be true.

Specialist factual is a UK term, for which there seems to be no equivalent in the rest of the television world: it covers science, history, natural history, maybe religion, often adventure, archaeology. Everything from high-end cosmology on *Horizon* to living history like *Mutiny* or *24 Hours In The Past*; from medicine in *Trust Me I'm A Doctor* or *Gabriel Weston's Incredible Medicine*, through *Planet Earth II* to *Your Face Says It All* or *Nova*. We also have to include all the crime shows that aren't documentaries, since they too mostly come out of specialist factual production companies.

Right now, it feels like there is a return to real content-driven programming, especially outside the UK. From National Geographic's *Mars* to entirely content-driven channels like Smithsonian and Science, there's more of an appetite than there has been for some time for shows that actually contain real

information about the real world. There seem to be two sides to this – one is the waning of the fashion for reality shows, especially for male audiences; the other is a rediscovery that there is a substantial viewership out there who just want the facts, delivered in an entertaining way, but who have a real interest in history or science. These aren't niche interests but they were underserved audiences for much of the last decade.

But the key word in all of this is 'entertaining'. There is room for a certain amount of 'lecture with pictures' but the lecturer had better be damn good (Mary Beard for instance or Lucy Worsley). Beyond that, specialist factual is working harder than ever to try to win over viewers.

A great way to think about it is the 'point of entry'. We live in a world where there are hundreds of channels and thousands of other calls on our attention. As programme makers we have to accept that we're in a fight for eyeballs. Just because we make it doesn't mean viewers will come. And specialist factual is at the heart of this. We can try to answer a real questions people have about the world around them – specialist factual tends to deal with a lots of whys? and hows? and how-tos. We can promise spectacle and event; we can borrow from other genres (is *24 Hours In A&E*

really documentary or specialist factual?); but we have to deliver truly fascinating content that people are going to be talking about the next day.

That also means judging our audience cleverly. If you're doing a space show for Science Channel, it's a fairly safe bet that your viewers are already interested in space, as shown by the ever increasing figures for our head-hurting cosmology show *How The Universe Works*. If you're doing it for BBC One, you've probably got to persuade them to be interested in the first place. A show like *Mutiny* has a multi-layered appeal; it's survival, with a present tense narrative of men against the odds (and yes, at least one of them has a beard before they even start), but it's also a history show about one of the most incredible journeys of all time, and it's a revelation of the hardships of the lives people once lived.

It's also needs to learn to be more "clippable". There's a who audience out there for short form, on YouTube, and we ignore them at our peril.

In a post-truth world, how does specialist factual survive? Maybe as the sole purveyor of verifiable fact? Whatever the form, there are certain essentials – we have to tell great stories in an entertaining way, that connect to our viewers' lives, whether helping them make sense of the world around them through history or science, or restoring a sense of wonder through natural history. We have to innovate, constantly show them things they have never seen before and film it in new ways with new narrative structures. We have to be ambitious, confident that bigger sometime is better, and that we have something important and contemporary to say. If we do all that, specialist factual isn't going anywhere. **TBI**

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