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Television Business International

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November 2018

Made with China:
The new norm?
Page 16

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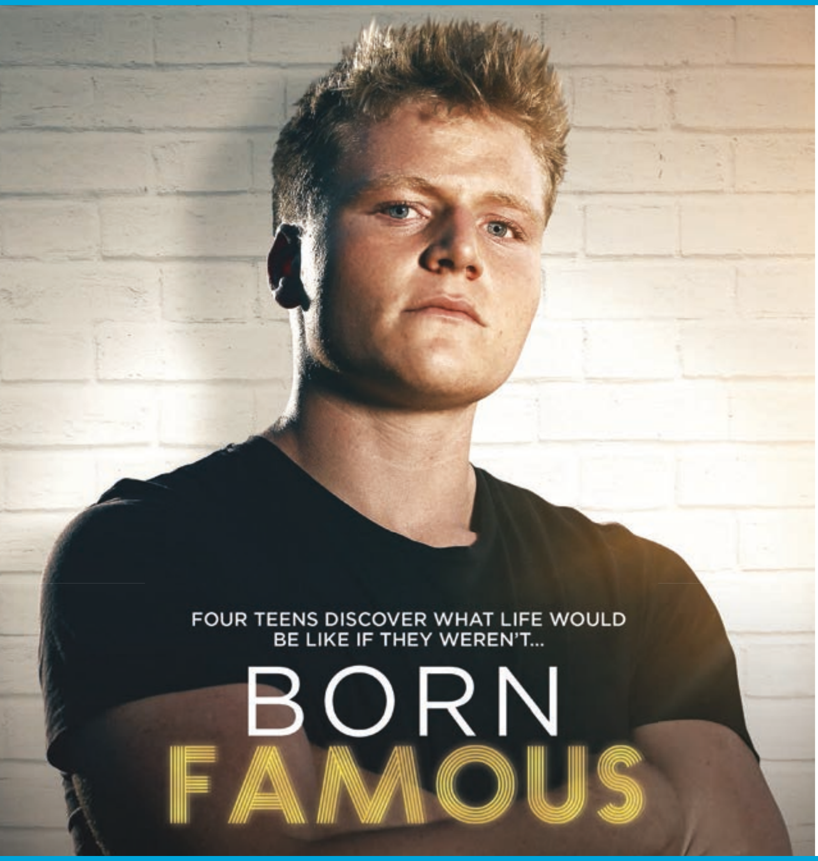

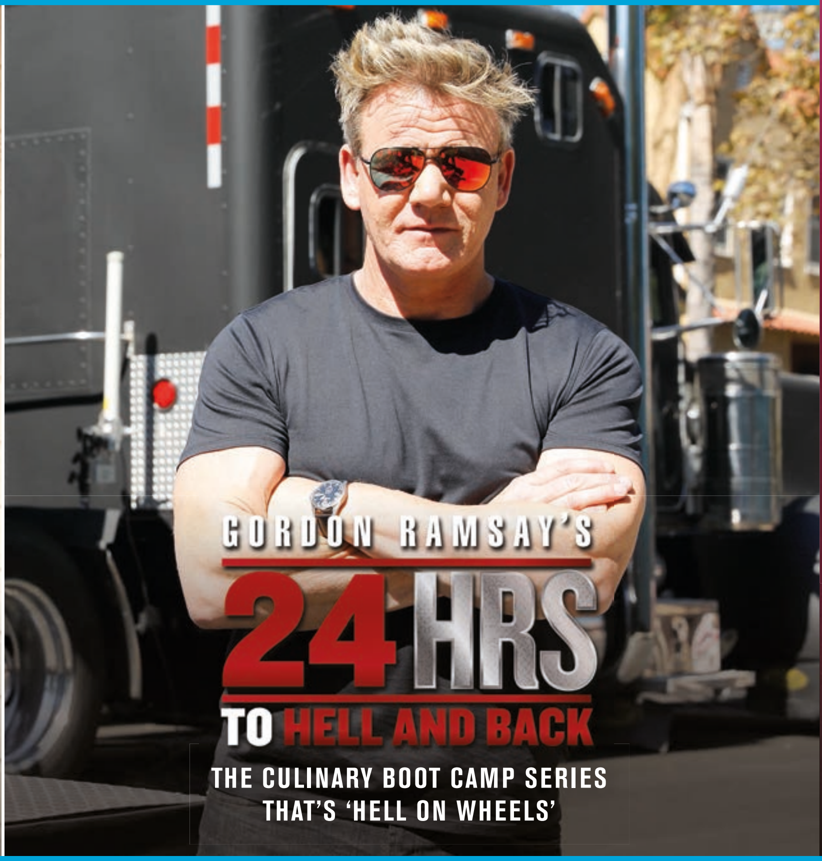

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TBI Asia 2018

Welcome

As Singapore gets ready to welcome Asia TV Forum delegates, this year's edition of TBI Asia – incidentally my first as Editor of this 30-year-old brand – points to a palpable shift in attitudes around business in the region.

Not only is there more understanding by the international production and distribution community around the rules of play – made with China, as opposed to made in China, for starters (for more on that, check out our deep-dive on page 16) – there is also an exceptional level of innovation out of major markets.

Take Viacom 18's Indian streaming service Voot, for example, which is quickly breaking out of the purely AVOD space and launching a premium product that will soon be on offer in the UK.

And then there's Finnish telco Elisa's plans to launch a Nordic streaming offering in China – a service that could reach up to 245m households – not to mention Singapore-headquartered Hooq, which is striving to build out episodic content in emerging markets.

Perhaps Propagate Content co-founder Harold Owens says it best when he points to a new "international connectivity" between East and West. *The Lore* and *Charmed* producer tells TBI about the A+E-backed business's plans to strike more creative partnerships out of Asian markets.

Finally, if you needed further proof that some of the most exciting pacts in television are currently coming out of Asia, check out our Dealmakers section, which profiles the key execs – all of whom happen to be women – making major plays out of the region.

Yours Sincerely,

Manori Ravindran

Manori Ravindran

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Published by KNect365 TMT, Maple House,
149 Tottenham Court Road, London W1T 7AD
Tel: +44 (0)20 7017 5000
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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 Informa Telecoms Media, 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, NY11413. 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, NY11413. Subscription records are maintained at Informa Telecoms Media, Maple House, 149 Tottenham Court Road, London, W1T 7AD, United Kingdom. Air Business Ltd is acting as our mailing agent.

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Hooq gets hyper-local

Hooq CEO Peter Bithos tells TBI how he is transforming the Singapore-based streamer from the 'home of Hollywood' to the home of hyper-localized content for emerging markets. Kaltrina Bylykbashi reports.

In what is now one of the most competitive SVOD environments in the world, Hooq – the WarnerMedia, Sony Pictures Television and Singtel–owned streamer operating in Southeast Asia and India – is looking to differentiate its service by targeting the hard-to-crack mainstream audience across emerging markets.

Based in Singapore, the streamer serves local audiences as well as those in India. But it is the emerging territories such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand that it has recently set its sights on.

As Bithos describes it, the audience Hooq is after makes at most US$350 a month, do not have a long-established culture of paying for content and are yet to see regular, high-quality episodic content that is localised.

"Most services [in Asia] are attempting to reach the iPhone customer base, and we're going after the Android customer base, to put it simply," says Bithos.

Apple's iPhone is more likely to reach the quickly growing middle classes, like those more often seen in India and China. Android, in-turn, looks to a wider consumer base and entices them with a lower price point.

Creating a monetisable business model for such an audience is a "very hard challenge" and hasn't been done yet according to Bithos. But since 2015, the company's core aim has been, and continues to be, to adapt the common European/US-based monthly subscription model to work at scale in Southeast Asia.

While in pursuit of its goal, Hooq has been able to innovate on two significant fronts. The platform was the first in the world to offer download rights for its Hollywood content, ahead of regional competitors and the likes of Netflix and Amazon.

Hooq is also the first platform to have offered "sachet pricing", giving audiences access to seven-day subscriptions since 2015. It continues to experiment with new ways of delivering content to consumers, recently introducing one-day packages in Indonesia for as low as US$0.25 cents.

"Monthly subscriptions in Southeast Asia don't work," says Bithos. "There will be days when the customer doesn't have money, so our various packages across territories are an example of us addressing the needs of the market."

Hooq's most ambitious plan yet, however, is to offer 100% localised programming to these audiences - at the very least offering subtitling - and to create original, episodic content.

Building episodic

The "bulk" of content on Hooq's service in emerging markets is a result of licensing. With access to Warner Bros. and Sony content, it holds titles such as *The Flash*, *Supergirl*, and *The Big Bang Theory* and brings them to new audiences.

But in Southeast Asia, the company has recently doubled its local content in certain markets. Across Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines, local programming now accounts for more than 50% of viewing minutes, according to the company.

"Most of what we try to do is lead and differentiate with local. We have great Hollywood content, we have great regional content, but we've really doubled on local," explains Bithos.

"I suspect the bulk [of content] will be licensing for some time, but we're trying as fast as the ecosystem can allow, to shift to episodic originals. There's a limit on how fast you can do that because there are not that many opportunities to produce great stories at scale in the region."

Up until now, audiences in emerging markets have either relied on movies or high-volume series for entertainment, with very few limited series available from the region.

Hooq is attempting to shift these tastes by increasingly investing in local talent across the emerging markets and building out a library with more of these titles. It established talent development competition Hooq Filmakers Guild in 2017, leading to a new Indian original, *Bhak*, for the platform, and has ramped up its investment in originals as a result.

"Original content for us is one of our largest investment areas, from an incremental dollar perspective, so we want stories in Southeast Asia for Southeast Asia," says Bithos.

Hooq currently has 30 original titles either on the platform or in the pipeline across the region. In Indonesia, these include 20 original movies, one drama series and two pilots.

A recent addition to the platform is Indonesian crime drama *Brata*, which is co-produced with telco Telkomsel, while movie original *Marlina The Murderer in Four Acts* has already proven popular since its premiere in February.

The company will also roll out two movies in Thailand and two pilots for development in Singapore, in addition to the release of *Bhak*.

"We have to do a lot of different experiments. We have done co-productions with studios, telcos and directors, so we have lots of different business models that we've been trying," adds Bithos. "We've also done hybrids where we launch a movie that we take to the box office, followed by episodic."

For the second year in a row, Hooq will also launch a pilot from Hooq Filmakers Guild which encourages filmmakers, directors, producers and screenwriters to enter a competition scheme where they can win US$30,000 to produce a pilot.

Diverging strategies

Despite its investment in *Bhak*, Hooq's strategy in India is shaping up to look quite different from that of emerging markets.

In the territory, Hooq is looking to be the prime destination for English-language content licensed from Hollywood studios. Its landmark partnership with Hotstar in October defines how different its approach is in the market, which is more developed in production and services, compared to Southeast Asia.

Under the deal, Hooq act as an OTT channel on Hotstar at no extra cost to the consumer. It will bring its wide library of series and movies from Warner Bros., Sony Pictures, Lionsgate and Miramax to Hotstar's already packed portfolio of HBO, Fox and Disney titles.

"As of today, we're on Vodafone, we're on Airtel and there's more coming. We have the largest Hollywood catalogue of any of these players," says Bithos.

Hooq's local-language strategy also differs here. Whereas in Southeast Asia all content is delivered in local language, it's mixed in India. But even here Hooq aims to have all Hollywood

Marlina

titles dubbed in at least two or three regional Indian languages by the end of 2019.

"In many cases in India, many of the great Hollywood titles that you would know, like *The Flash* or *Supergirl*, may have never been seen in a local language like Tamil, Telugu or Bengali," says Bithos. "So we're out to change that and try and be one of the first players to highly localize deeply in all the territories we operate in."

This shifting strategy could prove wise. India is a quickly maturing market with some stiff competition within its borders from Fox's Hotstar and Viacom18's Voot to Amazon and Netflix – which described extensive plans for the market during its third quarter earnings report this year.

Instead, Hooq has focused its streaming capabilities on Southeast Asia's largest market, Indonesia. With 260m people to serve, the nation has become an attractive market for the company, where it has introduced a string of new offerings to serve its audiences.

Most recently, it launched a skinny bundle package, which will roll out regionally at a

Bhak

"We're trying, as fast as the ecosystem will allow, to shift to episodic originals. There's a limit to how fast you can do that because there are not many opportunities to produce great stories at scale in the region."

Peter Bithos, Hooq

later date. This will mean the streamer will offer 20 pay-TV channels including Discovery Channel, Animal Planet, TLC, Dreamworks and E!, with local language subtitles across its premium offering.

Pay-TV penetration in Indonesia is very low, accounting for around 10% of its population. For the first time, many Indonesians will be able to access titles such as *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* or *BattleBots*, for as little as 25 cents a day – a first in the region.

"It's not a bolt-on or an additional purchase; it's part of the offering so that in addition to on-demand Hollywood content, you get 20 channels of pay-TV on your phone on any device. For the first-time millions of Indonesians have access to something they have never had access to before," explains Bithos.

The move follows the launch earlier this year of Hooq's freemium layer, with live streaming of nine Indonesian free-to-air TV channels in Southeast Asia's largest market. Among the channels now provided are JakTV, MNC TV and RCTI.

The competitors

Hooq is using its efforts in the emerging spaces as a point of differentiation in a market that is developing at break-neck pace.

Ampere Analysis data across Asia shows that Hooq's 2.6m subscribers are dwarfed by platforms such as iQiyi, which draws near 50.1m. Amazon and Netflix are also growing their presence in the region drawing 9m and 5.7m, respectively.

Meanwhile, Hooq's direct competitors iflix and Viu have 4.9m and 2.6m subscribers, respectively.

While Hooq frequently leads with new innovations, the streamer still has competitors snapping at its heels. It may be taking a step back in India, but its focus on Indonesia and lower-tiered price points are also becoming a target for other companies.

Netflix, in particular, has suggested that it will look at varied price points for the region, recently testing a cut-price mobile-only offering in Malaysia. In addition, in an interview with India's *Economic Times* Netflix CEO Reed Hastings also expressed the desire to support content in Asia with more regional languages and storytelling styles.

But Bithos doesn't see these platforms as competition quite yet. "We're not trying to take on Netflix anywhere. They're after very different customers than we are. We're really after a mass-market play and they're after high-end customers and that's okay," he explains.

"We're more deeply local and way more differentiated in local content by a mile. We will never stop on that, so our belief is if you want to match the mass-market customer you have to have content that speaks to them and while we'll always have great Hollywood content– and won't try to differentiate there – we'll try and differentiate with amazing local programming."

In the meantime, Hooq will stick to its core territories until it has pinned down a business model that truly works for a mass-market Asian audience, according to Bithos.

"We've seen players go to 30-40 countries and do that before they have the right business model, which we think is a very foolish idea," he says. "We've stuck to our knitting and we're really interested in creating a consistent business where we are. We might see a future in Vietnam - it's always been an important play in Southeast Asia - but we're not rushing." **TBI**

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Running Wild with Bear Grylls

Propagate's Asian ambitions

Ahead of his debut at the Asia TV Forum, Propagate Content co-founder Howard T. Owens tells TBI his plans to break into the Indian market and what's to follow the business's recent acquisition of *Jane The Virgin* producer Electus. Manori Ravindran reports.

Known for bringing hit formats such as Mexico's *Ugly Betty* and the UK's *The Office* to the US, the founders of Propagate Content are now poised to apply the firm's founding principles of "international connectivity" to Asian markets.

Set up by former Nat Geo boss Howard T. Owens and Ben Silverman in 2016, the A+E Networks-backed business received a major cash injection via merchant bank The Raine Group earlier this year – a hefty investment that has empowered the producer-distributor to expand its global horizons.

The impetus going forward is to partner with "independent voices" around the world, and expand strategically in key markets such as India, China and Korea.

"There are stories that need to be told, and diverse voices that need to be celebrated," Owens tells TBI, highlighting the potential of the Indian market.

"India is burgeoning at the premium scripted level. Whether it's Apple's *Shantaram* or Amazon's *Inside Edge*, these are examples of big scripted tentpole series that are getting traction and getting noticed in the global market."

The territory's burgeoning middle class – predominantly under the age of 30 – and extensive smartphone penetration opens the doors to new creative partnerships for the likes of Propagate.

"We just need the right opportunity for premium video content production and creation. That stems from being both opportunistic, and also knowing where growth is coming from globally," explains Owens, who will deliver a keynote at the Asia TV Forum in Singapore.

The business remains one of the first ports of call when it comes to plucking out a hit format – or "elevated IP", according to Owens – and sending it to major markets, but it can also help to establish local content generation hubs, provide expertise in building writer's rooms or send over showrunners.

"We are interested in lending our expertise to the process," explains Owens. "The goal would be to have these emerging global markets ultimately create their own storytelling infrastructure, which we can then support from elsewhere. That's the roadmap.

"Propagate is at its best when it's working with creatives and crafting ideas and pushing forward production stories that need to be told."

Raine Group backing will ultimately see the business partnering with local production communities across Latin America and the Middle East to develop, produce and distribute original formats.

The business recently struck a deal with US cable channel FX to develop hit Colombian format *La Niña* for the US market. The show follows Sarah García, aka La Niña, as she struggles to reintegrate into society after living as an enslaved teenage sicaria (hit woman) for the most ruthless drugs cartel in Mexico.

Elsewhere, Propagate has signed a development deal with *Jack Ryan* actress Dina Shihabi for a scripted series based on the Saudi-American experience.

Earlier this year, the business invested in Edouard de Vésinne's French prodco Incognita and Owens notes that another investment has been made in the French market. A Brazilian deal is also in the works.

"We also have projects going in Mexico City and other parts of Latin America and we are looking at the rest of Europe as well," he says.

Propagate International head Cyrus Farrokh adds that he is looking to replicate the formats deal recently struck with Greek broadcaster Antenna in an emerging market through a relationship with a local production company.

The Greek pact, struck in October, sees the businesses team up to develop, produce and distribute original formats and content.

Two original series are currently in development and set to air in 2019. The first production is a local version of the Propagate game show format *Wham-O's Slip 'N Slide* for Antı TV, and a second series is hidden camera prank show *My Best Friend's Fear*, which finds an unsuspecting individual set up by their best friend for an unforgettable prank.

"There is no template that will see us doing each territory exactly the same but we're being opportunistic in fulfilling the needs of broadcasters and streamers in various markets," says Farrokh.

Electus acquisition

Last month, the business acquired R*unning Wild With Bear Grylls* producer-distributor Electus from IAC, while also taking the business' majority stake in talent agency and *Black-ish* producer Artists First.

The deal was negotiated by Propagate president Greg Lipstone, who joined the business from All3Media America earlier this year, along with Propagate's VP of finance and corporate development Kelly Fancher.

Owens said the two firms are currently going through a "true integration" process in which they are reviewing personnel and "all of the assets" at play.

Jane The Virgin

"We are getting a sense of how everything will work together. One of the most attractive things about Electus is their international assets, which are excellent."

Headed by John Pollak, Electus International has more than 4,000 hours of library content, including titles such as NBC's *Running Wild with Bear Grylls* and Starz's *Wrong Man*.

The talent piece of the Electus deal – which hands Propagate a majority stake in Artists First along with a minority stake in Authentic Talent & Literary Management – is particularly important for growth in the near future.

Led by Peter Principato, Artists First produces ABC comedy *Black-ish*, Freeform spinoff *Grown-ish*, and ABC's *The Gong Show*, while clients include Will Arnett, Jordan Peele, Ed Helms, Tiffany Haddish, Awkwafina, Jon Chu and Tracee Ellis Ross. Founded in 2001, the company has offices in Los Angeles, New York and Chicago.

"Propagate is at its best when it's working with creatives and crafting ideas and pushing forward production stories that need to be told."

Howard T. Owens

Earlier this year, the producer-distributor created a new international co-production model for unscripted programmes dubbed '6/26'. The process saw four broadcasters – Australia's Nine Network, France's TF1, Germany's Nito (part of RTL Germany) and Nordics-based MTG – coming together as a 'sales coalition', similar to distributor DRG's Atrium project.

"We really like their creativity," says Owens. "They have a good array of domestic productions in the US that are really additive to what we're already doing with our strong production platform, along with the international business."

There is also a natural synergy between Propagate and Electus, given that Silverman founded the company with IAC in 2009.

Meanwhile, Farrokh was previously senior VP and head of sales at Electus International, before joining Owens and Silverman in 2017.

"It allows us a shortcut to what can be a frustrating and cumbersome part of the development and pitching process," said Owens.

"When you work with great talent, it allows you to streamline that process and garner stronger deal positions. It enables you to basically determine where you want to make your show.

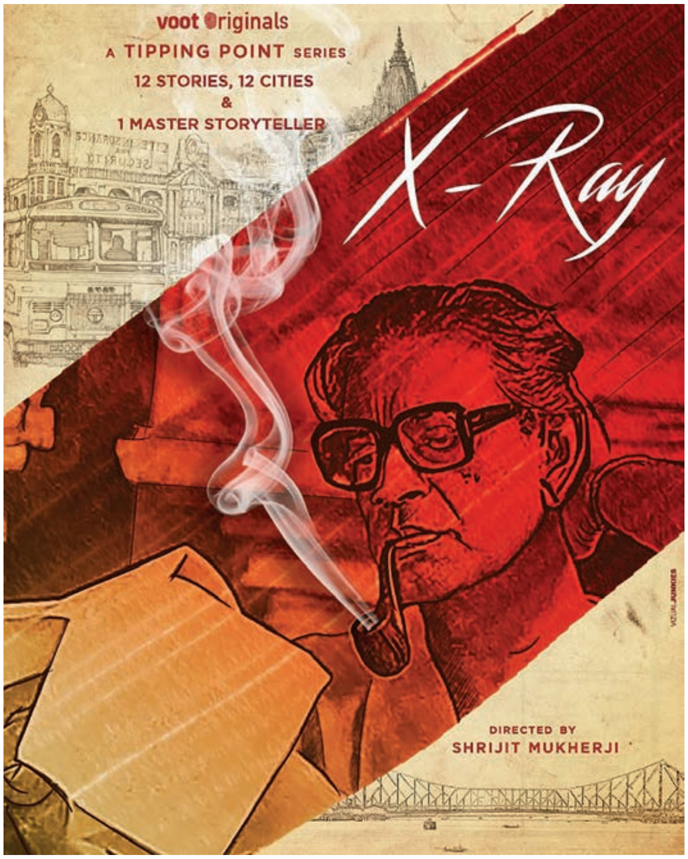
"And now that the networks and streaming services are having to present distinct DNA, it's also becoming more important for us to determine where we want to be and where to place our best content and creative assets."

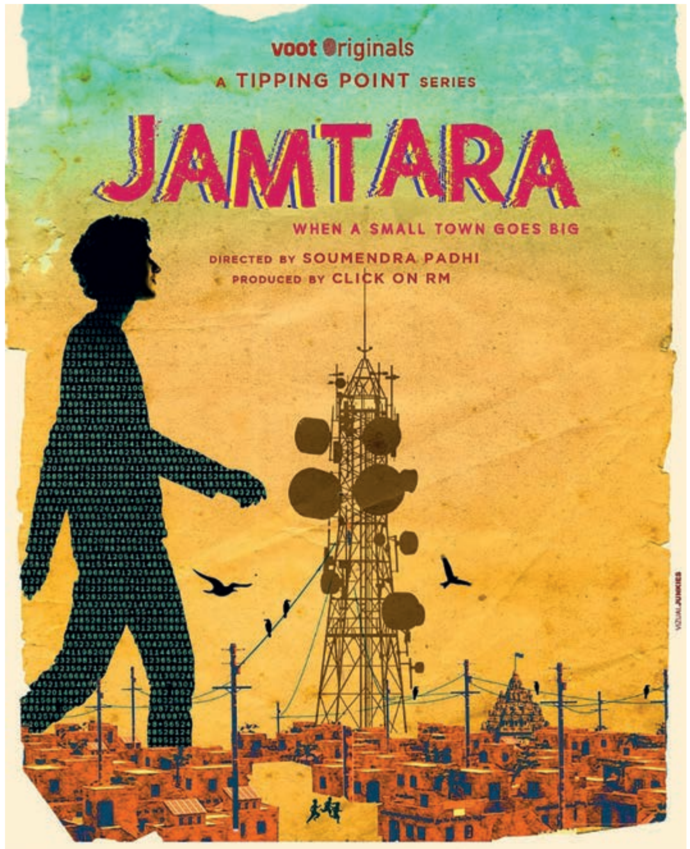
With Electus in hand, access to a raft of high-profile talent and further international investments in sight, Owens says the future is "limitless". **TBI**

DAYDREAMER

GOLD STAR

Viacom's Voot joins the premium ranks





Viacom 18 group CEO Sudhanshu Vats tells Manori Ravindran how Indian streaming service Voot is quickly transforming from a wholly AVOD proposition into a multi-faceted SVOD platform that extends well beyond India and into the global market.

In the race to capture India's 300m streaming video users, Viacom's AVOD service Voot is scaling the ranks with an aggressive expansion strategy that is leaving global SVODs Netflix and Amazon well in its wake.

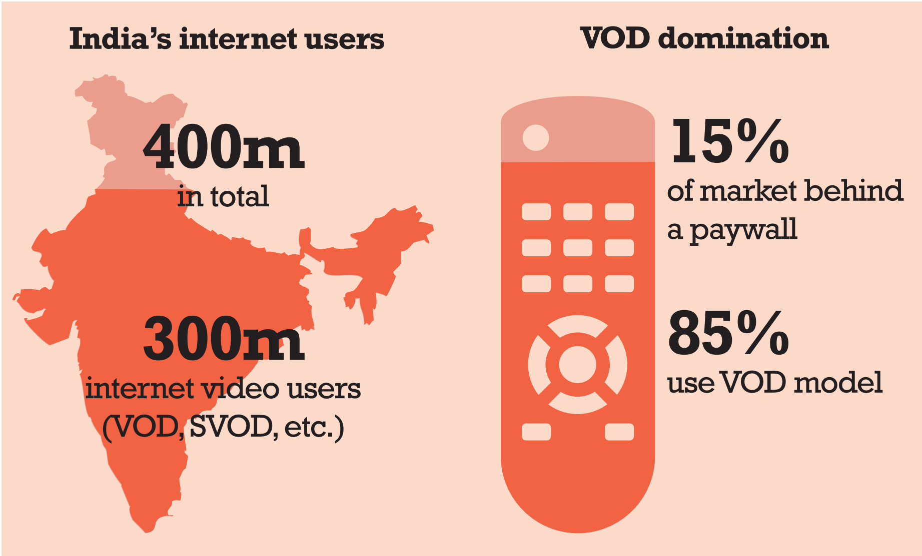
Launched in beta mode in May 2016, the ad-supported streaming player is quickly evolving from a catch-up player for Viacom India channels, such as Colors TV and MTV, to a go-to destination for feature films and original programming.

With around 45m monthly users that engage for an average of 50 minutes per day, the platform – which is owned by Viacom 18, a JV between Viacom and Indian channel operator TV 18 – is the third largest digital platform in India, behind 21st Century Fox-backed streamer Hotstar and Sony's Sony LIV service, but well ahead of Amazon Prime and its estimated 10m subscriber base and Netflix's 1m subs, according to Viacom's in-house data.

Unlike the US market, where Netflix and Amazon built their businesses on the backs of hits from the major studios, Indian media players such as Viacom, Fox, Sony, Zee and SunTV were loath to license their content – expected to total around 90,000 hours per year, collectively – to these platforms, apart from select feature films.

Instead, they were steadfast in holding on to all rights for most of their content: a strategy that has enabled them to build out their digital platforms into heavy-hitting VOD services.

A second crucial difference between the US and Indian markets is that Netflix first launched Stateside with a US$8/month service when monthly cable bills cost around US$80, providing enormous value to consumers.



It has proven difficult, however, to extrapolate that unit price in India, where a cable bill of roughly US$3/month can get consumers close to 300 channels, completely undermining the value of a Netflix subscription, which has yet to be lowered for the Indian market.

Sudhanshu Vats, group CEO of Viacom 18, says the platform produces around 15,000 hours of local content per year, all available in Hindi, English and six other regional languages.

The service is currently free – with revenue coming exclusively from ads – but the business is moving towards a freemium model that will paywall some premium content and is expected to launch mid-2019.

While a pricing strategy is still being worked out, the former Hindustan Unilever exec, who joined Viacom in 2012, notes that "with cable bills being so low, the fees for a subscription service in India should be around the US$3 mark as well."

Voot originals

Currently, 60% of viewing on the platform revolves around catch-up programming, while 20% is targeted at "shoulder content" – extras from programs such as *Big Brother* and *Roadies* which are then branded as digital exclusives.

The remaining 20% is divided equally between Voot Originals, which constitute around 100 hours of local programs such as *Feet Up With The Stars*, *Jamtara* and *It's Not That Simple*, as well as kids content, some of which is acquired from the likes of Japanese and Chinese platforms and broadcasters.

"As we go forward, we are looking to launch a dedicated product for Voot Kids that will sit behind a paywall," explains Vats, noting that there will be a strong educational element to the SVOD service.

On the drama front, Voot has commissioned around 18 hours that span an array of regional content. Other programming originates from the film studio Viacom 18 Motion Pictures, which has a stable of recent feature films, including *Andhadhun* and *Padmaavat*, and recently launched digital content studio Tipping Point.

"They will produce both web series and films for our offering that will be fairly Bollywood-focused," says Vats.

While Voot has yet to strike any output deals with US studios for English-language content, plans are underway to selectively place some of these programs on the premium platform.

Global ambitions

International co-productions are also on the cards, though "first explorations will be in the film space," says Vats, noting that plans are already in place for feature films co-produced with China and Canada.

For now, the platform is focused on making a concerted push into the premium space – a strategy that is increasingly congruent with the "data revolution" that has seen data packages become highly affordable across India.

"We expect India will have close to 700m streaming video users by 2020 and is likely to follow China from the perspective of digital business model development," points out Vats.

"If you go back around five years, China had around 400m streaming video users, but in 2018, that number has doubled to 800m. Similarly, five years ago, they were also a largely free VOD market, just like India, but now around 15% of the Chinese market is paywalled."

Vats reckons that as India reaches 700m streaming video users, a similar 15% of the country's digital video content will also fall behind paywalls.

Going forward, Voot is also looking to target the Indian diaspora around the world, and will launch in the UK this autumn as a paid service on Virgin Media, where the platform will be available as an app.

"Virgin customers will have access to everything on Voot," says Vats, adding that monthly pricing will fall in single-digit pounds.

"Some of our Hindi content is already available in the UK on channels such as MTV and Colours TV, but we have a lot of content in different dialects, and together with our shoulder content and originals, it's of great interest to the diaspora audience."

Ultimately, Viacom 18 hopes to expand Voot into 20-odd countries, all of which have strong Indian diasporas. Eventually, the app will be rolled out globally.

"The plan is to present a fairly chunky offering globally. We own the rights, so we can do that," he says. **TBI**

"We expect India will have close to 700m streaming video users by 2020 and is likely to follow China from the perspective of digital business model development."

Sudhanshu Vats, Viacom 18

Sri Lanka's star is Rising

A local adaptation of Keshet International's *Rising Star* is having a transformative impact on Sri Lankan broadcaster Hiru TV. Manori Ravindran reports.

A "renaissance" in Sri Lankan entertainment programming has led to more demand than ever for large-scale offerings that leverage audience engagement.

Unlike the island nation's monolithic neighbor to the north, India, it has taken time for Sri Lanka to progress from the soap operas – known locally as 'teledramas' – as well as Sinhala-language music programs and sporting events such as cricket that have dominated the market for decades.

Nilendra Deshapriya, director of acquisitions and content for Hiru TV and parent company Asia Broadcasting Corporation, and previously a prominent director in the TV industry, has been at the forefront of the reality boom in Sri Lanka, having first attempted to adapt *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* in 2000.

"The biggest problem at that time was that there was no telephone infrastructure, and that format demands telco partnerships because of elements such as the hotline. That was all new to Sri Lanka," he says.

Entertainment programming has only gained significant traction in the last two decades, with free-to-air broadcaster Sirasa TV breaking through in 2005 with singing competition *Super Star*, which became a nationwide hit thanks in large part to advances in telco infrastructure that allowed audiences to vote via text message.

Millionaire eventually followed on Sirasa TV's sister channel MTV in 2011 – marking the nation's first major international format adaptation – but it was a "very slow process" and most materials and equipment needed to be imported from Singapore. Meanwhile, training for Sri Lankan execs and crew took place in India, where the show had aired since 2000, hosted by Bollywood mega-star Amitabh Bachchan on Star Plus.

However, homegrown entertainment programming is now firmly ensconced in the landscape, says Deshapriya, pointing out that there has been a "paradigm shift in terms of programming as well as viewership and interaction".

"The most important element of the equation is the viewer, who has a device in their hands. They become the driving force of storytelling, and that's why these shows have taken Sri Lankan TV audiences by storm, and still continue to bring in high ratings," he explains.

The popularity of interactive shows was the impetus behind Hiru TV's headline-grabbing deal for Keshet International's singing format *Rising Star* – an order that amounts to five seasons of 52 x 90 minute-episodes, making it one of the highest-volume format deals in recent history.

International opportunity

Originally created and produced by Israel's Tedy Productions and Keshet Broadcasting, the format has had a chequered history, having launched in Cannes in 2013 to widespread interest, but courting controversy a year later, when ITV scrapped the show ahead of launch amid concerns over cost and lackluster ratings in the US.

The format's blockbuster debut at MIP has gone down as one of the last major format launches in Cannes, although its post-market fall from grace in the West has become something of a cautionary tale for buyers to exercise more patience around acquisitions.

However, *Rising Star* largely overcame its wobbly start, and has now sold in more than 35 territories, including Brazil (Globo), Indonesia (RCT1), China (CCTV) and Greece (Antenna).

Deshapriya first encountered the format at MIPCOM in 2013, and later saw it adapted in India on Viacom-owned channel Colors TV, though bringing the format to Sri Lanka was the brainchild of ABC chairman Rayynor Silva, who brokered the deal earlier this year.

The show – which is titled *Hiru Star* and billed as Sri Lanka's first live reality program – recently wrapped its first season, airing in a 7.30pm slot on Saturday and Sunday evenings.

According to Deshapriya, the program has brought some acclaim to the six-year-old Hiru TV, which was in many ways an ideal broadcast partner for the format, given its major backing from parent company ABC, which equipped Hiru with state-of-the-art technology ahead of its launch, and has expanded it into one of the largest channels in Sri Lanka.

"The most important element of the equation is the viewer, who has a device in their hands. They become the driving force of storytelling."
Nilendra Deshapriya, Hiru TV

"We were all aware that programs such as *American Idol*, *X Factor* and *Got Talent* have changed the international TV landscape, but we all thought *Rising Star* was a real beauty," he says.

"It's one of the first live TV shows where the audience can vote through a mobile app via handheld device, and where their photos show up on screen in real time."

The format's physicality, with a wall going up when contestants reach a certain percentage of votes, was also of interest. "The whole strategy was to take things to the next level for the channel," adds Deshapriya.

While some territories tend to move carefully ahead of local adaptations of an international format, generally testing the waters with just one series order, Deshapriya explains that the channel was confident the show would be a success from the get-go.

The business also took into account the investment required to launch the format, including the technical infrastructure around the app as well as the studio equipment required for set pieces such as *Rising Star*'s LED wall, which features the photos of app users who are engaging with the show.

"The early finales of Sirasa's *Super Star* rated higher than Sri Lanka winning the Cricket World Cup. These shows become a religion, and we had the confidence that it would deliver," says Deshapriya.

Indeed, the program has delivered high ratings and the exec describes its reception in the country as something of a "cultural phenomenon".

Going forward, ABC is looking to develop more homegrown entertainment formats, but will continue to acquire international titles selectively.

Alongside competition from local players such as Sirasa and entertainment channel TV Derana, Hiru TV is now competing with the likes of encroaching SVOD players, such as the Malaysia-headquartered iflix, which launched in Sri Lanka in 2016 alongside streaming giant Netflix.

But Deshapriya remains confident that Sri Lanka's "reality renaissance" can continue unfettered for local broadcasters, so long as they continue to keep audiences engaged with interactive programming.

"When it comes to reality television, storytelling evolves to a completely different level, because once the auditions and casting are complete – whether it's for *Rising Star* or *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?*, you see regular people aspiring to become something more, and audiences want to take part in that journey.

"All these elements come together in a single episode, and that can be amazing for our market. *Hiru Star* has had a huge impact." **TBI**

Rising Star

Humans

Made with China:

Is it time to transcend the quota narrative?

International distributors are increasingly finding new ways of navigating the mixed messages shrouding China's ominous content quotas and censorship rules. Andy Fry investigates.

In recent times, international content companies have been confronted with two conflicting narratives when it comes to China. On the one hand, the country has been pitched as a fast-growing market with a voracious appetite for content, but on the other, it stands accused of being overly protectionist around its content and too lenient on format IP theft.

These mixed messages have been especially evident in 2018. At MIPCOM, Fan Weiping, deputy director of China's powerful industry regulator State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) said a prominent feature of China's film and TV industry was its "openness", citing partnerships with the likes of HBO Asia, Sony Pictures Television and Fox Networks Group.

Only a month earlier, however, the TV trade press was buzzing with news that China was pushing ahead with content restrictions that would outlaw foreign TV shows from primetime, restrict imports and clamp down on content that "deviates from socialist core values."

One show that immediately fell foul of the latter injunction was streaming platform Youku's adaptation of NBCUniversal's *Saturday Night Live*, which was cancelled in July.

More recently, format protection watchdog FRAPA raised the specter of format theft at MIPCOM, with co-chair Jan Salling telling TBI that China was dealing with "serious infringement issues" and that some companies "have no interest in importing".

So where exactly does the truth lie? Seemingly, somewhere in between.

One executive with decades of experience brokering partnerships with China tells TBI that the Chinese market is so vast that "everything can be true at the same time".

"What is clear is that revenues made from China go up every year. Streaming platforms like Tencent, iQiyi and Youku have helped make China the top revenue-generating market in Asia for many distributors."

Similarly, Kelvin Yau, SVP and GM for Greater China at BBC Studios Distribution dubs China a "vibrant, dynamic market."

BBC Studios Distribution works with all the major broadcasters and platforms in China including CCTV, SMG, Tencent, Youku, iQiyi, BesTV and Migu.

"Natural history is popular as is *Sherlock*. Broadly, public broadcaster CCTV favours serious documentaries and the streamers are more commercial, but everyone wants quality."

The point is illustrated by analyst firm IHS Markit, which says China is the second-biggest spender on TV content in the world ($10.9bn in 2017), with 46% (5bn) attributed to international content acquisition, including sports rights.

So how do we square this assessment with China's content quotas? According to one senior distribution executive, the real shift relates to volume deals.

"The main negative impact will be felt by online platforms that don't produce much content and rely on high-quality foreign content to attract and retain subscribers," the exec tells TBI.

"Big volume sales into China are likely to be highly limited and foreign content will have to be premium in order to cut through."

TBI understands that Tencent is currently reducing its documentary acquisitions due to the quotas, meaning that factual is affected.

Business booming despite quotas

As it happens, a lot of the above is already happening, as networks and platforms have known about the proposed content quotas for some time.

Chris Bluett, VP sales for Asia-Pacific and Benelux at Cineflix Rights, says, "The big factual volume deals have gone from the market for now as buyers are having to be more selective, so our recent deals have focused on key franchises like Cineflix Productions' *Mayday: Air Disaster* and Impossible Pictures' *World War II's Greatest Raids*."

Bluett's experience is reflected in other recent sales to China, such as A&E's *Knightfall* and Studiocanal's *The Child In Time*.

Studiocanal's head of international sales Beatriz Campos confirms that the market is looking for marquee titles: "*The Child in Time* benefited from the fact that it starred *Sherlock's* Benedict Cumberbatch, who is well known in the region. That allowed us to create strong competition."

Meanwhile, content broker The Media Pioneers has just sold kids series *The Moe Show* and *Pop Up* and Tom Hardy-fronted period drama *Taboo* to Youku and Alibaba.

Commenting on the *Taboo* sale, Maggie Liang, managing director and executive producer, says: "What interested me about *Taboo* was that the storyline was universal, making it suitable for Chinese audiences. Although it is a tough piece of TV, we did the necessary editing to satisfy the Chinese censor."

In Liang's opinion, focusing on content quotas obscures the fact that China is still moving in the same direction as other developed markets.

"China is becoming a lot more selective about the shows they pick. They want well-known casts and captivating storylines. And they want a balance between foreign and local content, as most countries do."

It is undeniable that the loss of high-volume deals is a blow to distributors but it is not catastrophic when you consider the sheer number of Chinese platforms.

Bluett says China is still in his "top-tier" among Asia revenue generators – and a market he is planning to target in 2019.

William Tan, MD of Endemol Shine China, echoes that view. "Many markets have restrictions and China is no exception. But I have not seen evidence that China is not open for business."

The Child in Time

Fuji TV's *Dating China*

Dynasties

Jianing Shen, EVP of CITVC, the commercial arm of Chinese public broadcaster CCTV, reiterates the SAPRFT view that China is open for business, pointing to the first China International Import Expo in Shanghai in November, and noting that CITVC is fully committed to helping international firms do business with China.

"Every year, CITVC imports a large amount of content, including dramas, documentaries and movies. It has imported 5,000 episodes from more than 50 countries."

According to Shen, 2018 alone saw CITVC import more than 100 international movies and dramas, such as *Reckless Bride* (Thailand), *A Love to Remember* (Mexico), *Solo* (Ireland), and *Lessons of a Dream* (Germany).

The exec says editorial restrictions are primarily used to control "violence, terrorism, sex and other elements."

The real issue, she contends, is that US and European content is not always tailored to suit Chinese demands: "For example, with TV series, we prefer daily rather than weekly broadcasting, so the average number of episodes for Chinese TV series is about 40."

Co-pros remain the way forward

While volume deals may be temporarily on hold, there is a counterveiling trend towards international co-production, explains Shen.

Among numerous CITVC-backed examples, Shen cites *Lands of the Sky River* (CITVC, National Geographic Channel Asia); *Origin* (CITVC, Left Bank Pictures and SPT), and *Riding the Ocean Dragon*, co-production between CITVC, CCTV-10 and Australian producer SeaLight Pictures.

Further, BBC Studios and Tencent have a copro agreement for natural history series *Dynasties* while FNG's Nat Geo Wild announced a copro with Bilibili on *China's Hidden Kingdom* at MIPCOM.

October Films executive chairman Denman Rooke has just visited China as part of a UK producer delegation and is working with 3C Media and Bilibili on a food-related concept.

Rooke notes there is "undoubtedly a creative appetite for co-production in China" but points out two key challenges.

"The first is that the funding model is very different in China, so it takes time to agree a structure. Secondly, you need to find a subject that can satisfy China's content restrictions but also appeal to the global market."

Alongside co-production, there has also been increased scripted format activity.

At MIPCOM, SPT president Wayne Garvie cited *Chosen*, a partnership between iQiyi and Huaso, a JV between CCTV-6 and SPT. Endemol Shine, meanwhile, licensed *Humans* to China and has just signed an agreement with Blue&White&Red Pictures and IP specialist Cloudwood to make a Mandarin-language version of *Broadchurch*.

Elsewhere, Fuji TV has just agreed a far-reaching partnership with Shanghai Media Group. It has also licensed large volumes of content to Youku and negotiated a Chinese remake of *Confidenceman JP*.

"In recent years, about 20 of our titles have been remade in China," says Takayuki Hayakawa, VP of content creation and distribution at Fuji TV. "Typically, the Chinese examine each title's [track record] closely before choosing, but *Confidenceman JP* was signed during the writing process."

Hayakawa believes part of Fuji's success is down to the shared cultural heritage enjoyed by China and Japan. But like Liang, he doesn't have concerns about content restrictions.

"I've heard that some European countries are demanding that SVOD distributors such as Netflix purchase a certain amount of local content. Restrictions in China are structured the same way. In my view, quality overrides any restrictions," he said.

What's the future for formats?

However, two issues that international content companies do need to monitor are the following. Firstly, iQiyi CEO Gong Yu's ambition to spend more on original content implies there will be less need and resource among streamers for acquisitions.

Secondly, there seems to be a slight softening of attitudes to Korean content, which was banned two years ago following a political dispute. Korean TV content is so popular in mainland China that, should official restrictions be lifted, it would provide stiff competition for content from the rest of the world.

And what of FRAPA's format theft concerns? The problem originates from regulations that limit the number of foreign entertainment formats that Chinese broadcasters can acquire. While the intention was to stimulate original Chinese IP, it has resulted in some copycat disputes.

South Korean producer CJ ENM, for example, alleged that iQiyi copied its talent show *Produce 101*. However, Jin Woo Hwang, head of formats and development, used MIPTV to stress this was not a general criticism of China - noting that other streaming platforms like Youku and Tencent "do their best for the formats industry.

IP theft is clearly an issue that China still needs to address. But it hasn't prevented breakthroughs such as Tencent's acquisition of *Kids Got Talent* from Fremantle China and Syco Entertainment.

Besides, says Rebecca Yang, CEO of content broker IPCN, the copycat criticism should not deflect from China's burgeoning creativity.

"We introduced formats like *Got Talent*, *The Voice* and *So You Think You Can Dance* to China. But we've shifted more towards digital and short-form because that's where the creativity is happening. We have an online music network called Channel R and have launched formats like *Street Credit*, which we believe can work both in China and internationally."

Endemol Shine's Tan echoes this point, stressing that the company is keen to own and export Chinese IP.

"We have sold non-scripted formats like *The Brain* and *MasterChef*. But China has grown to become a hotbed of creative talent, ideas and entrepreneurs, and our Chinese entity has responded by establishing co-development deals with the likes of Youku and Hunan TV.

"We are also working closely with CCTV to create a version of *The Nation's Greatest Treasures* that will appeal to our global clients." **TBI**

Kids Got Talent

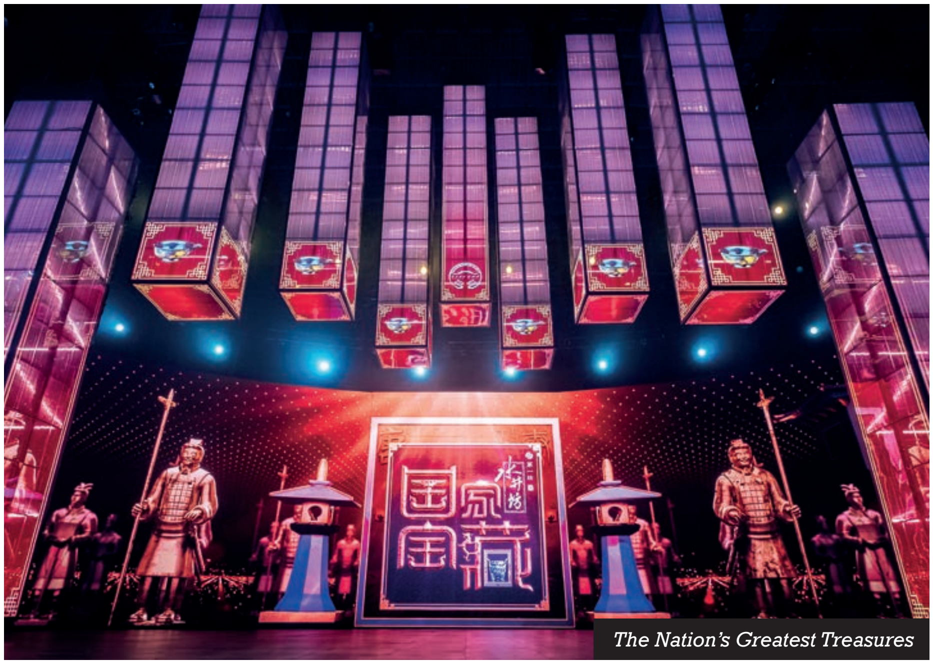
From imitation to innovation: East Asian formats are on the rise

K7 Media's APAC manager Michelle Lin breaks down the shifting life cycles for formats out of Asia, and predicts which territories could next have its moment on the international stage.

Japan, without a doubt, is the pioneer in the Asian TV industry as far as format sales are concerned. It is the only Asian country in K7 Media's Top 100 Travelling Report, with hit formats ***Hole in the Wall***, ***Dragon's Den*** and ***Ninja Warrior*** exported to as many as 45 countries worldwide.

It is why the country's neighbours, such as Korea, were quick to take inspiration from the nation's emerging business in the early 2000s, developing shows that were close in likeness and almost certainly would not pass muster in today's more stringent IP-protective industry.

Such obvious "inspiration" can often be found in developing media industries, as up-and-coming producers seize on proven concepts and ideas to catch up with the international market. China's top streaming platform iQiyi, for example, attracted the negative attention of CJ ENM for alleged copycat titles ***Produce 101*** and rap show ***Show Me the Money*** as China opened up to global sales.


The Nation's Greatest Treasures

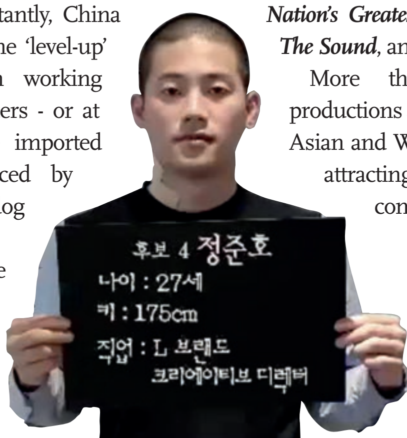
In reality, what the Korean industry saw from China is very similar to what the Japanese saw from Korea a few decades ago. However, in the long term, the appeal of copycat formats diminishes as domestic industries gain confidence and their own identity, and original formats gradually dominate.

Chinese broadcasters and producers are now reaping the benefits of legally licensing Korean formats, with their built-in quality and popularity. Most importantly, China is taking full advantage of the 'level-up' opportunities gained from working directly with Korean producers - or at least they were before the imported formats cap was introduced by China's media watchdog SAPRFT in 2016.

Running Man is one example of how this approach works in practice. Zhejian TV purchased the format for $4.8m from Korean broadcaster SBS in 2014. Korean crew then travelled to China to co-produce the first season. Zhejian took more creative control for subsequent seasons, with SBS still assisting, but by April 2017 Zhejian TV produced season five by itself, albeit with a name change to skirt Chinese government regulation.

Now, China has transformed into a producer of formats rather than just a consumer, with prominent examples including CCTV's ***The Nation's Greatest Treasures***, Hunan TV's ***The Sound***, and Youku's ***Dunk of China***.

More than ever before, co-productions and partnerships between Asian and Western media entities are attracting attention and becoming commonplace. Banijay Group and Korea's SBS have co-developed talent show ***Fan Wars***, debuting in Korea this month. UK indie Zig Zag Productions and Korean producer IMTV are currently working on ***Dating Detectives*** for CJ ENM's tvN channel, with BBC Studios Distribution holding international rights outside the UK and Korea.



Dating Detectives

What will be the next countries to rise up the format ranks? Thailand and Vietnam lead other South East Asian countries, with over 50 formats each licensed in the first half of 2018, according to trade outlet *Content Asia*. Furthermore, NBCUniversal has already entered the Thai market with 2017's ***Singer Auction*** from local production company Zense Media.

The growth from imitation to innovation happens rapidly when skills and knowledge are shared across borders. By all indications, players from different parts of the world are becoming more united in the quest for global formats that can thrive in a media landscape where old borders no longer apply. **TBI**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Nordic noir heads to China

Finnish telco Elisa enters the ring as one of the first international players looking East for its next streaming play. Manori Ravindran reports.

Nordic noir is poised to make a substantial move in the under-served Chinese market via a dedicated platform launched by Finnish telco Elisa – a play that will open up co-production opportunities for Nordic content producers looking to work in China.

Elisa has partnered with China Broadcasting and Television Media (CBM) – a subsidiary of China Broadcasting Network – to bring the Finnish business's global-facing Nordic TV SVOD to up to 245m households in China in 2019.

Elisa, a market-leading OTT service in Estonia and Finland, has historically been the largest reseller of Netflix in its local markets, but began changing tack a few years back, increasing investment in domestic originals.

"More recently, we moved into international-scale productions that target the global market," Einari Kanerva, director of Nordic TV, tells TBI, highlighting projects such as the Sky Vision-distributed *Bullets* and the Lagardère-sold *Arctic Circle*.

Bullets

With sights set on expanding entertainment offerings outside Europe, the business went in search of international opportunities in 2016.

"We started to investigate the Chinese market, and did all types of research that indicated a lack of certain kinds of European and Nordic content there," explains the exec.

When an independent launch in China proved to be considerably difficult due to strict legislation and regulatory hurdles, CBM – one of the leading IPTV providers in the region – joined the venture as Elisa's Chinese partner.

Together, the businesses carried out a 2017 study in Shenzhen, a city of 10m in the province of Guangdong, taking a Nordic TV program and airing it to CBM's customer base for a few months to gauge consumer interest.

The experiment demonstrated exceptional demand, and CBM and Nordic TV formalized the partnership, with Nordic TV overseeing content acquisition, localization and delivery, and CBM managing local operations and marketing.

"Our programming will initially form part of [CBM's] SVOD service, which will carry a Nordic TV section," says Kanerva, noting that the service could be broken out as a standalone platform in the future, once there is greater brand recognition.

Around half the platform will be drama, while roughly 40% will be documentary and reality, alongside some sports content.

As for censorship concerns – one of the most harrowing realities for any content provider in China – Kanerva allows that the team "does keep it in mind" when curating content, but he is confident they can steer clear of complications, so long as they stick to natural history and certain types of scripted shows.

"Our research indicates that nature docs would be an interesting play for Chinese audiences," says Kanerva, adding that Nordic natural history may not have the budgets to compete with BBC blockbusters such as *Planet Earth II*, for which TBI understands Chinese digital giant Tencent put up 10% of the budget as a co-production partner, but might not necessarily need to.

"I don't think we have to compete. We can complement those shows," he says.

Natural history will also open the door for co-productions with Chinese players in the region – a strategy that will expand to more travel and lifestyle-related projects.

"We will look to select the first co-production projects next year," says Kanerva, noting that dramas will be "more challenging and take more time."

Nordic TV's Chinese service will contain around 1,000 hours of programming and is to launch in December. It will initially target the Guangdong province and eventually expand to around 10 provinces by March 2019. **TBI**

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The Dealmakers

As business across Asia continues to flourish amidst shifting regulations and censorship, TBI introduces the key individuals shaping the landscape, including the Fox exec who acquired a Youku original in a historic format export; the producer who can connect you to your next fixer in China; and the distributors pushing projects through China's censorship bureau and selling into India. Manori Ravindran reports.

LIZ MCLEOD

Founder of Meridian Line Films; Consultant with CICC

The deal: linking international producers with Chinese fixers and co-pro partners

McLeod has a handy first piece of advice for anyone looking to work in or with China: get ready to play the long game. The former True North and Granada exec began working in the region in the 1990s, producing for the likes of Discovery Asia, Nat Geo and CCTV-9.

She formed Meridian Line Films in 2015 with Nacressa Swan and has expanded into consultancy work with the China Intercontinental Communication Center (CICC).

Increasingly, McLeod – whose extensive credits include Discovery Asia's *Smart China* and CCTV-9's *China: Time of Xi* – is looking to serve as the go-between between the international production community and Chinese fixers, whom she is keen to train up.

"There are a lot of talented, very well-educated and hardworking people in China. They need some training to understand what it is that TV does and what a foreign company needs in the way of fixing help on the ground," she says.

"This could be a whole new way for Chinese media graduates to earn their living and for foreign production companies to find a better supply of more experienced fixers."

McLeod is eager to shepherd a new kind of fixer in China, who transcends a purely logistics-focused role.

"You want someone to do what an assistant producer does – not just focus on locations and fix commissions, but also cast characters and do research connected to a character."

The producer is planning workshops in both China and the UK to improve awareness of these roles in each territory.

"There's a sense among broadcasters and platforms here that there is a lot to be gained from understanding international factual storytelling methods," she says.

McLeod says digital players such as Youku and Tencent are "more flexible and business-focused" than traditional broadcasters. They are also looking for increased involvement in program-making from foreign producers and talent.

"Five or 10 years ago, Chinese audiences were not very sophisticated, so as a Chinese broadcaster you could acquire programs made by ZDF or BBC and audiences would lap it up because they were such great quality," she says.

"However, viewers are now savvier, and they want co-production relationships with foreign broadcasters and producers to include China, with their experience and characters in the mix with other stories. That's something people should think about."

Most importantly, says McLeod, Chinese execs are interested in long-term relationships.

"Rather than do one project and that's it, foreign parties need to dedicate personal capital and be respectful."

Smart China

CORA YIM

SVP and head of Chinese entertainment and original production at Fox Networks Group Asia

The deal: acquiring Youku original *The Dunk of China* for worldwide distribution

Fox Networks Group Asia made headlines at MIPCOM when it swooped for worldwide format rights to streaming giant Youku's sports entertainment format *The Dunk of China* – marking one of the first wide-ranging deals for a format out of the territory.

With judges and mentors including Brooklyn Nets player Jeremy Lin and Chinese mega-star Jay Chou, the show features aspiring basketball players who take part in team games and individual challenges to determine the top player in the group. When it premiered on the digital giant in August, *The Dunk of China* garnered more than 50m views.

Cora Yim, SVP and head of Chinese entertainment and original production at FNG Asia, tells TBI, "While Chinese media companies initially remade Western formats such as *The Voice* and Korean titles, companies such as Youku have been trying hard to develop their own original formats in the last few years. The quality has increased and is now surpassing even Korean content.

"We've been approached by many Chinese channels with their original formats to be remade by Fox, but *The Dunk of China* was so original. Also, it's rare for a Chinese show to come from the sports entertainment field."

FNG Asia will look to localize the basketball competition series for regional and global markets, and a local Taiwanese version is already underway for Fox Sports Taiwan.

Yim highlights that the challenge around exporting Chinese IP has historically been an over-reliance on high-profile talent.

"Around 50-70% of a variety show budget can go towards paying the stars, unlike US or Korean shows, where resources are spent on the format itself. That's been a challenge for exporting Chinese shows."

The "beauty" behind *The Dunk of China*, she says, is that basketball crosses boundaries, and injects a "youthful energy" to the format. "It feels different from the usual food, travel or singing show," she adds.

Yim is on the look-out for other IP from the region, and has her eye on books from China, Taiwan and Korea that could be adapted into TV series or films.

While FNG Asia's ownership is set to change following Disney's mega-acquisition of Fox's entertainment assets, Yim is confident China will remain a key market for the Mouse.

"We will definitely pay more attention and do more in Chinese production because we see the growth and need for this content."

The Dunk of China

SABRINA DUGUET

EVP Asia Pacific at All3Media International

The deal: selling a scripted format into Viacom 18-owned Indian AVOD Voot

Two years after setting up All3Media International's Asian office in Singapore, Sabrina Duguet has had her biggest year yet for scripted deals.

The EVP for Asia-Pacific tells TBI that an increasingly international angle across All3Media's scripted slate has helped in deal-making.

"The catalogue is a lot broader," she explains, highlighting Two Brothers' ITV/Amazon US co-production *White Dragon*, which was titled *Strangers* in the UK.

"It definitely has a more global feel to it because it was commissioned for the US and UK, but so much of it takes place in Hong Kong. That has really helped our discussion with clients because they can see that projects are a lot more international in topic and execution."

The global-facing nature of All3Media's scripted projects combined with a dedicated Asian office that helps execs better understand the region and have daily contact with clients has also opened up more partnerships and co-productions.

"There is now so much scripted production out of Asia that it has led to more scripted formats, and we are doing more of these out of the region. These partners are looking for key co-production partners in the West."

Asian companies are also boarding projects at much earlier stages. "Before, a program needed to be fully aired with high ratings. That has changed completely, and we are doing sales on scripted programming much earlier."

White Dragon/Strangers

TBI understands that the distributor has struck a scripted format deal with Viacom 18-owned Indian streaming service Voot.

The business has also partnered with Banijay Asia for a six-title formats deal. While five are unscripted, one title is scripted.

Duguet's specialty is formats, having served as SVP of international format sales out of London before her Singapore move. Her formats know-how was vital when All3Media International launched a formats pitch competition at the Asia TV Forum, an extension of its MIPCOM competition.

The first winner of the three-year-old competition, sports-inspired game show *Hit It*, was eventually picked up by Singapore's Mediacorp, and the business has secured another deal for a format from last year's pitch.

"There is massive business in the region now. No one previously thought these formats could move westward, but there are more producers in the US and UK who are increasingly open to look at this content," says Duguet.

MAGGIE LIANG

MD and executive producer of The Media Pioneers

The deal: placing the risqué *Taboo* drama with Youku and Alibaba

Founded in 2013, UK-China media group The Media Pioneers operates as a distributor and co-production partner in China.

Overseen by MD Maggie Liang, the business struck a landmark deal this year by selling FX and BBC One's racy, Tom Hardy-fronted drama *Taboo* into China's Alibaba and Youku.

"When I first watched it, I thought it was a little challenging, but was confident I could make it work and we worked hard to follow the guidelines and push it through," says Liang, who acquired the show for the Chinese market from international distributor Sonar.

"Once you pass the censor, there can be further discussion with the platform."

The exec re-edited the program with Scott Free Productions' approval and managed to get the title past China's strict censorship bureau – a major feat for any distributor, let alone one selling *Taboo*, in which Hardy's protagonist has an incestuous relationship with his half-sister.

"We need to be really smart in terms of how to match the censor's demands, and sometimes I get suggestions from the partners [I am trying to sell into]," she says.

Hardy's role in sci-fi thriller *Venom*, which was recently released in China, also played a part, says Liang, who notes that Youku was also surprised the deal went through.

The exec's next projects are "a little safer," she laughs, explaining that they are more in the procedural thriller vein. "They are a little more like *Sherlock*, which is a bit more accepted by the Chinese market."

Liang is currently on the look-out for late-stage animation and drama projects for distribution and is also focusing on co-production opportunities.

She is currently looking for partners for high-end drama *Shanghai Confessions*, which is co-funded by Taiwanese firm Datang International Entertainment and has so far received interest from global SVODs. **TBI**

Taboo

LAST WORD

JULIAN CHOU-LAMBERT

Scaling the Great Firewall

With China in the spotlight again at MIPCOM and ATF, what's the best way to approach working with its huge online platforms?

The Chinese term *fān qiáng* literally means to climb over a wall, but these days it's mainly used figuratively to denote climbing over the Great Firewall of China - both by adventurous Chinese netizens trying to get out, and foreign media companies trying to get in.

American giants Facebook, Google, YouTube, Twitter and WhatsApp have all successfully scaled the wall in the past, only to find themselves back on the outside shortly after.

Politics, censorship and national regulations all play their part, but what is often overlooked, is that China doesn't necessarily need all the services of these companies; it has digital giants of its own.

From Tencent to Alibaba's Youku, Sohu to iQiyi and mobile giant Huawei, China's digital landscape is bursting with innovation, premium content and audiences in their tens of millions. This 'smart revolution' has benefited from a unique mix of high-level competition in a closed marketplace, and private and state-funded innovation with global ambitions.

So how can non-Chinese producers, platforms and distributors benefit from, or even join, this smart revolution? Scaling the cultural wall is a good place to start. Having strong, long-term relationships or *guān xi* is particularly important, as anyone with a little Chinese experience knows.

These partnerships will help you navigate the ever-changing viewing trends and regulations; there are currently widespread fears, for example, that the recently announced state restrictions on foreign content and ongoing format disputes will severely curb opportunities.

One way around such hurdles is to partner on China-based co-productions and export them, which TVF has increasingly done with projects including History Asia special *WWII: Forgotten Ally*, CICC's *China Wild*, and Ei China/Matchlight UK's E*mpires of Silver*.

Such projects do require detailed developmental and editorial collaboration, but the high production value and strength of these previously untold stories make them very popular with international broadcasters.

Within China, while higher-tier western-produced specialist factual can still be attractive, Asian co-produced content feels closer to home for Chinese viewers. Collaborating with regional players who already have a foothold across the wall can make a big difference.

Pan-Asian producer IFA Media's S*pecial Forces*, for example, which includes an exclusive episode on the Beijing Special Forces Brigade, and IFA/Discovery series *How China Works*, have both a strong appeal in China and dozens of territories worldwide.

This kind of big-scale, premium and topical content is in high demand across China, as broadcasters' and viewers' tastes have developed in line with the increased quality of domestic production.

In factual, blue-chip natural history has always been the safest bet with viewers across all ages, as exemplified by Tencent's lucrative co-production partnership with the BBC.

Tencent are also streaming TVF's Attenborough-narrated *Wild City: Singapore*, while youth-skewing streamer Bilibili pre-bought David Attenborough's *Jumbo* alongside light-hearted clip series *Dog's Best Friend* – it is the year of the dog, after all. If anyone is planning any porcine projects, next year could be very auspicious for you.

When pitching into China, scale can also be crucial in order to work directly with the big players; TVF's recent licensing deals with SVODs including Tencent, iQiyi, Bili Bili, BesTV and Sohu have each averaged over 100 hours of programming.

For indie producers and smaller distributors, it can be helpful to partner with national producer delegations and Chinese agents, respectively, to make an impact – the latter combine program sources together to achieve the required scale.

Looking forward, 4K is the word on everyone's lips, with Chinese ultra HD channels beginning to take off. China is also exporting more of its IP abroad, as seen in Endemol Shine's launch of CCTV's format *The Nation's Treasures* at MIPCOM, Netflix's boarding of Hunan TV/iQiyi costume drama *The Rise of the Phoenixes*, and Huawei's fast expansion into global markets.

Doubts remain on the impact of content restrictions and international trade spats but given the continuing growth of China's film industry and the state's 'Made in China 2025' initiative to digitize 10 industries, including new generation info-tech, there are still sure to be significant opportunities for persistent and savvy 'wall-scalers'. Time to strap on those digital crampons, and get climbing. **TBI**

Censorship and national regulations all play their part, but what is often overlooked is that China doesn't necessarily need all the services of international companies: it has digital giants of its own.


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