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# TBI Unscripted October/November 2021



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## Contents

### 2. Unmasking AVOD's format potential

Tim Dams asks if AVOD can provide a new breeding ground for unscripted ideas?

### 6. Formats Hot Picks

The low-down on some of the most intriguing new formats ready for acquisition

### 12. Shining a spotlight on self-financing

Is the risk worth the reward when it comes to fully funding factual projects?

### 16. Factual Hot Picks

Our selection of the best factual programming to keep your eye on

### 22. The truth is out there

Are streamers abandoning factual accuracy for viewing figures?

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# Unmasking AVOD's format potential

Could AVOD provide a fertile new breeding ground for fresh unscripted ideas? Tim Dams finds out



Fox-owned AVOD Tubi streams shows such as *The Masked Singer* and has plans to create original programming



Slowly but surely, free AVOD platforms are beginning to follow in the footsteps of their SVOD cousins and commission fresh, original content.

In a bid to differentiate themselves and to grow their services, several AVODs have already announced plans to greenlight their own projects.

Earlier this year, Roku purchased more than 75 shows that Quibi had created for its now defunct service, dubbing them Roku Originals, and the AVOD has followed that up by starting to commission its own series.

In June, it ordered a second season of the Roku original series *Die Hart* after the former Quibi series starring Kevin Hart had the largest opening weekend in the history of the Roku Channel. In September, it ordered its first feature-length film, *Zoey's Extraordinary Christmas*, and the company is also bringing *Eye Candy*, a “sweet, new competition series” based on Nippon TV’s gameshow format, *Sokkuri Sweets*, to fast-growing service The Roku Channel.

Amazon-owned free streaming service IMDb TV, meanwhile, has also been steadily ramping up its own slate of originals. On 1 November, former *Judge Judy* star Judy Sheindlin debuts her new show *Judy Justice* on the service. The first season is set to run for 120 episodes. The service’s other unscripted originals include a new home design series with *Flipping Out’s* Jeff Lewis.

Earlier this year, Tubi, Fox’s free, ad-supported streaming service, announced it too would enter the original programming arena this autumn. The company already offers shows such as *MasterChef USA* and *The Masked Singer* via the service, and Fox said its originals would feature 140 hours of animation, documentaries and shows across multiple genres, with details to follow.

The world’s largest AVOD platform, YouTube, also continues to order original unscripted content from producers. In the UK, indies such as Studio Silverback, Thames, HiddenLight and Century Films have recently picked up commissions from the internet giant. Thames, for example, produced *Hello 2021: UK*, a New Year’s Eve special for YouTube featuring stars such as Big Narstie, Katherine Ryan and Dua Lipa.

Elsewhere, ad-funded platforms such as Snapchat and Facebook are pressing on with their originals strategy. Snap Originals, for example, include Bunim Murray’s *Endless* and *Twinning Out*. Bunim Murray has also made *Ball In The Family* and *The Real World* for Facebook.

Broadcaster-owned ad funded streamers are also

starting to commission originals for their platforms. Carolyn McCall, CEO of ITV, said last year that the UK broadcaster will commission directly for its ad-supported streamer ITV Hub and Channel 4 said this summer that it is planning to launch a new international AVOD streaming service.

Hybrid AVOD / SVODs – such as NBC Universal-owned Peacock – are also making a selection of their original content available to viewers on free tiers.

## Can AVOD add up?

The originals strategies of so many AVOD services begs the question: could ad-funded streamers provide a fertile new breeding ground for producers’ fresh unscripted ideas?

Before answering the question, a little context. Free ad-supported streaming services are the fastest growing streaming category and AVOD revenues exceeded subscription video on demand revenues in APAC and the US in 2020, according to research by analyst group Omdia. It found that ad-funded streamers generated \$40bn, compared with \$32bn for subscription players.

India leads the world in terms of monthly active users on AVOD platforms, with more than half a billion free AVOD users. The US is second with nearly 200 million free AVOD users.

The platforms are making money, too. ViacomCBS expects its AVOD Pluto TV to reach more than \$1bn in revenue in 2022 and IMDb TV execs say their vision is to build “a modern broadcast network.”

All this suggests that competing AVOD players are only likely to invest more in content to stand out from the crowd as they look to exploit the potential of a growing market.

“I think the Roku and IMDb platforms are probably going to be the next ones to really hit in terms of buying content,” Bunim/Murray president Julie Pizzi tells TBI. “They are starting to populate their platforms with new unscripted programming.”

Her point is echoed by Mike Woodward, VP of development and production at The ATS Team. “We know most AVODs, especially Roku and IMDb TV, are building up their original content staff. Their time to become major players in this market may come a lot sooner than we expect. We absolutely get a sense they’re on the hunt for new formats that can become their flagship products.”

Insight TV director of content and channels Arun Maljaars points out that the growth of ad funded AVOD and FAST channels, like Insight TV, is being



*Sokkuri Sweets* (above) has been remade as *Eye Candy* for Roku, while *Twinning Out* is a Snapchat Original

driven by audience demand for free content. “Not everyone wants to pay,” he says.

Insight TV’s content is 80% original versus 20% acquired. Advertisers, he says, are supportive of new content. Insight, for example, is collaborating with shoe and clothing brands for new skateboarding documentary series *A Simple Path*. There’s a strong desire among advertisers to reach audiences beyond the ad-free subscription environment, he says. “Advertising needs to invest its money somewhere,” Maljaars points out.

### From smaller beginnings

As AVODs invest in content to attract advertisers and viewers, producers are likely to benefit. So it is worth building relationships up with AVODs now, say many producers.

ATS Team’s Woodward believes that AVODs may start small and option existing formats to determine what their audience likes – and that it makes sense to pitch to them while in their growth stages.

“We think AVODs will ramp up production of slightly smaller-scale original programming than what we are used to from the bigger existing SVOD players,” says Woodward.

“As SVODs have already been showing, the more non-original programming licenses they can remove, the more money they can spend on original programming that they own the rights to. They are here to test the waters – slowly and steadily. As with most things in life there is opportunity going with a David rather than a Goliath, and this is no exception.”



Getting in early with AVODs can also pay dividends in terms of extending a production company’s skills. Bunim/Murray’s Pizzi says that the shows it is making for digital platforms such as Snapchat and Facebook don’t represent a huge part of its business, the budgets are quite a bit smaller and the timelines are condensed too.

“But in terms of trying to connect with a younger audience, which we have always done as a brand, it’s really been instrumental for us to keep our finger on the pulse and really see how the future viewership is going to consume content.”

Pizzi points out that many of the younger generation prefer the likes of TikTok and YouTube to traditional broadcasters. “I think it is still in the experimental stage. I don’t know that anyone has really figured out how to amass the viewership on a regular basis of [people] that consume Tik Tok content.”

Many of the AVODs, of course, are still getting off the ground. For many of the services, it is early days, meaning that opportunities for producers to pitch in new unscripted ideas are few and far between. But while the opportunities may be limited for now, few producers expect it to remain that way in the years to come.

Not many predicted the astronomical rise of Netflix after it made its first tentative steps into commissioning original programmes, and the transformative effect it has had on production around the world.

So as the AVOD revolution gathers pace, history shows that producers would be wise to take note – and make sure they are not left behind. **TBI**

### “Roku and IMDb are probably going to be the next ones to really hit in terms of buying content”

Julie Pizzi  
Bunim/Murray



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# Formats Hot Picks

The very best format content heading to market

## Who Is The Phantom?

**Producer:** Constantin Entertainment

**Distributor:** Red Arrow Studios International

**Broadcaster:** ProSieben (Germany)

**Logline:** Celebrities attempt to guess the identity of the mystery Phantom – a famous face hidden behind a mask – in this primetime entertainment format

This spin on the popular ‘masked celebrity’ genre sees a team of three celebrities attempt to correctly guess the identity of the mystery Phantom – a famous face hidden behind a mask.

The Phantom, working with the show’s host, has prepared eight clues providing hints to their identity. But to fully receive each clue, the panel of celebrity detectives must first solve ingeniously presented riddles and quizzes.

As Tim Gerhartz, president and MD of Red Arrow Studios International, explains: “*The Phantom* presents every clue with either an entertaining studio performance or with a short cinematic clip. It’s a fun, challenging and visually interesting way of revealing intimate secrets about celebrities and combines the successful quiz and celebrity panel genres with the popular masked element in a unique and playful way.”

As the clues build, the celebrity detectives – and the audience at home – can start to guess who might be behind the mask, ahead of the big reveal.

“Casting is key,” says Gerhartz, for anyone looking to adapt the format. “A big name celebrity with an interesting

backstory and career, and a panel of well-known celebrity detectives is important.”

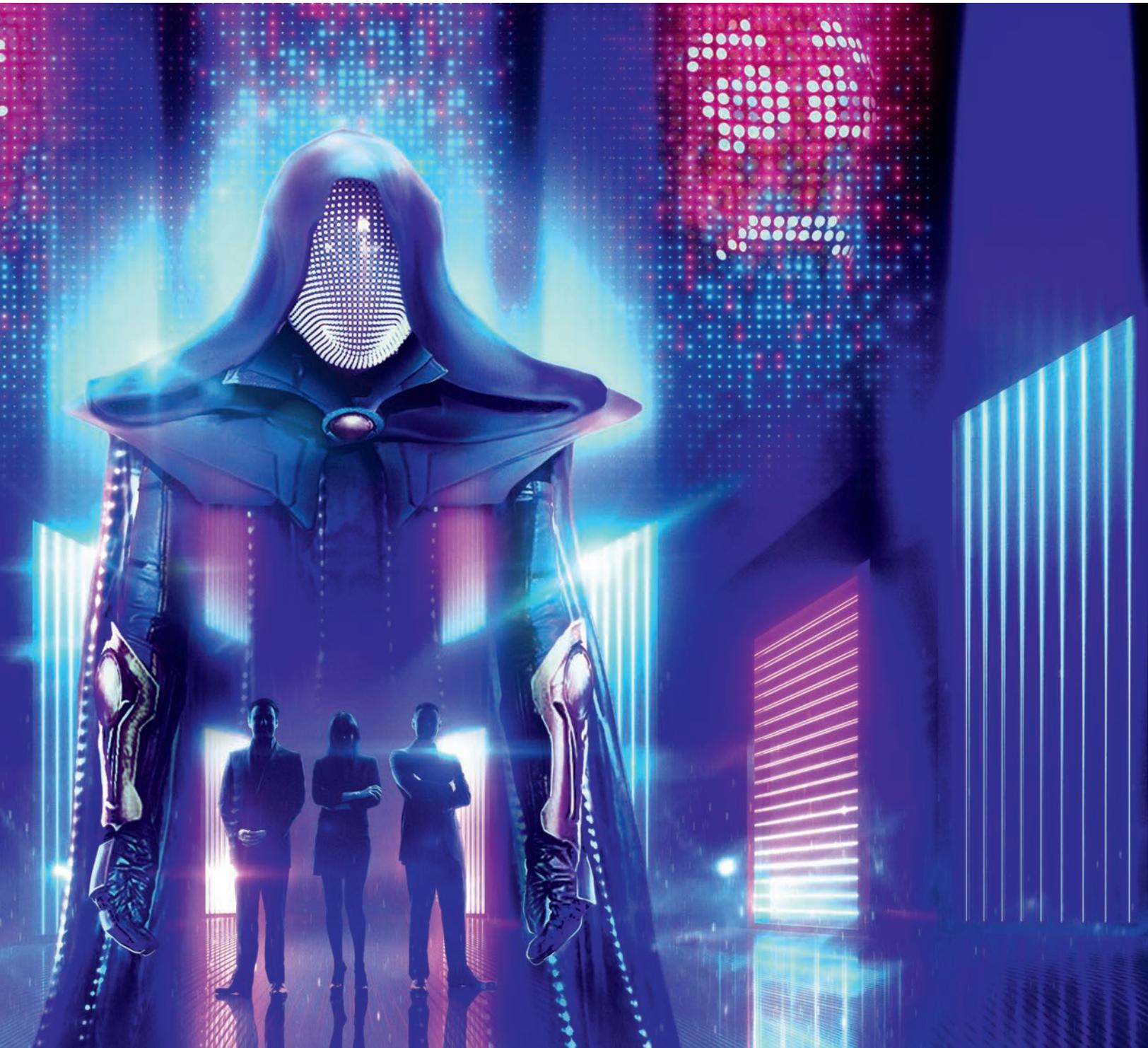
The exec adds that the format should appeal to broadcasters around the world as it is a “very flexible, scalable show” in terms of budget and also scheduling.

“It works very well as a weekly primetime event but could also be stripped across the schedule with the Phantom perhaps revealing themselves at the end of the week,” he suggests, adding: “There is also huge marketing potential for broadcasters to really tease the identity of the Phantom via trailers and press to whet viewers’ appetites.”

“The masked entertainment genre is hugely popular internationally and this is a different take on that genre that offers up huge play-along opportunity for viewers who can try to interpret the clues and solve the riddles to reveal the identity of the Phantom at the same time as the detectives,” says Gerhartz.

“The LED face mask which can convey the Phantom’s expressions and feelings in real time adds a level of charm and comedy and gives the Phantom a really unique character.”





### Celebrity Flight Club

**Producer:** Armoza Formats

**Distributor:** Armoza Formats

**Logline:** Reality format in which two teams of famous faces head to a flight academy and battle it out to take to the skies solo

This celebrity-driven series sees 14 famous faces split into two competing teams as they go through extensive flight training in a battle to be named the top of their class and experience the thrill of a solo flight.

The stars are checked into a real flight academy where they will live together, go through aviation training and compete in various missions – both on the ground and while up in the air.

“The celebrities face a wide range of challenges during their training, with the level of difficulty of the challenges escalating as the competition progresses,” reveals Michal Itzhaki, head of content



partnerships at Israeli outfit Armoza Formats.

All of this training happens under the watchful eye of a professional aviation team, who will evaluate the celebrities progress for the weekly elimination. In the finale, the top three finalists will perform their first ever solo flight and the season winner will be crowned.

“We provide access to an all-inclusive state-of-the-art flight academy that serves as our production hub. The academy was founded by Israeli Air Force Chief, Eitan Ben Eliyahu, who also serves as a consultant,” says Itzhaki, who explains that this dedicated hub provides local producers with everything they need to make

their own version of the format.

“We love seeing our favourite stars being pushed to their limits,” he adds, “and what could be more extreme than literally taking them to the sky? This is a fresh take on reality, with high stakes and drama in a unique, never-before-seen setting,” Itzhaki says.

### Domino Challenge

**Producers:** Endemol Shine North America, Endemol France, Endemol Shine Netherlands

**Distributor:** Banijay

**Broadcaster:** M6 (France), RTL (Netherlands)

**Logline:** Competition format pits domino-stacking experts against one another to see who can construct the most awe-inspiring creations

This family-friendly competition format offers a healthy dose of nostalgia as it pits the best domino duos in the country head-to-head as they attempt to build incredible creations.

Each episode sees the pairs facing a new challenge, and to avoid elimination, they must continue to up their game each week to impress the panel of expert judges.

At the end of each episode the creations will topple one by one and the couple that fails to impress judges will depart.

The series culminates in a grand finale, with the final teams competing to create two monumental builds.

James Townley, global head of content development at Banijay, says that the format delivers “wow” moments as it showcases the incredible creative skills of the contestants.

“There are also spine-tingling moments of jeopardy, knowing that one false move will bring the whole build to an end,” he adds. “We always look for diversity in casting as *Domino*

*Challenge* celebrates people and their expertise whilst offering the competitive edge.”

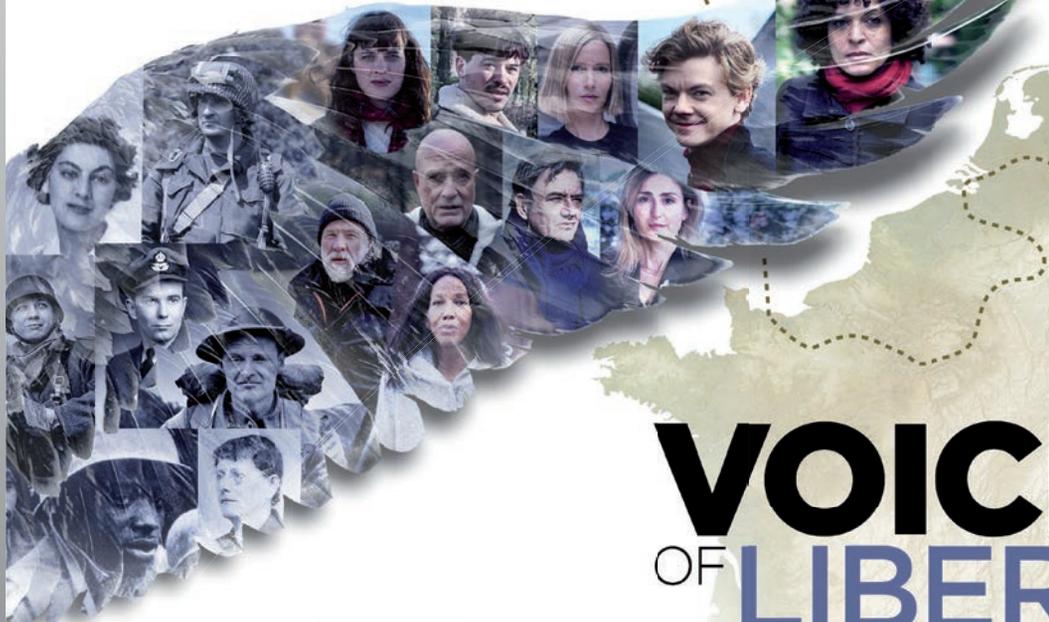
Townley also highlights that the format “lends itself very well to be scaled and suits local budgets and taste, by tweaking the themes of the creations, as well as the duration and number of episodes.”

The show premiered in France on M6 this summer and is in the process of being adapted in the Netherlands for RTL.

The original French series saw contestants assembling large-scale builds, ranging from a recreation of Ancient Rome with a massive replica of the Colosseum, to an Arctic scene full of polar bears.



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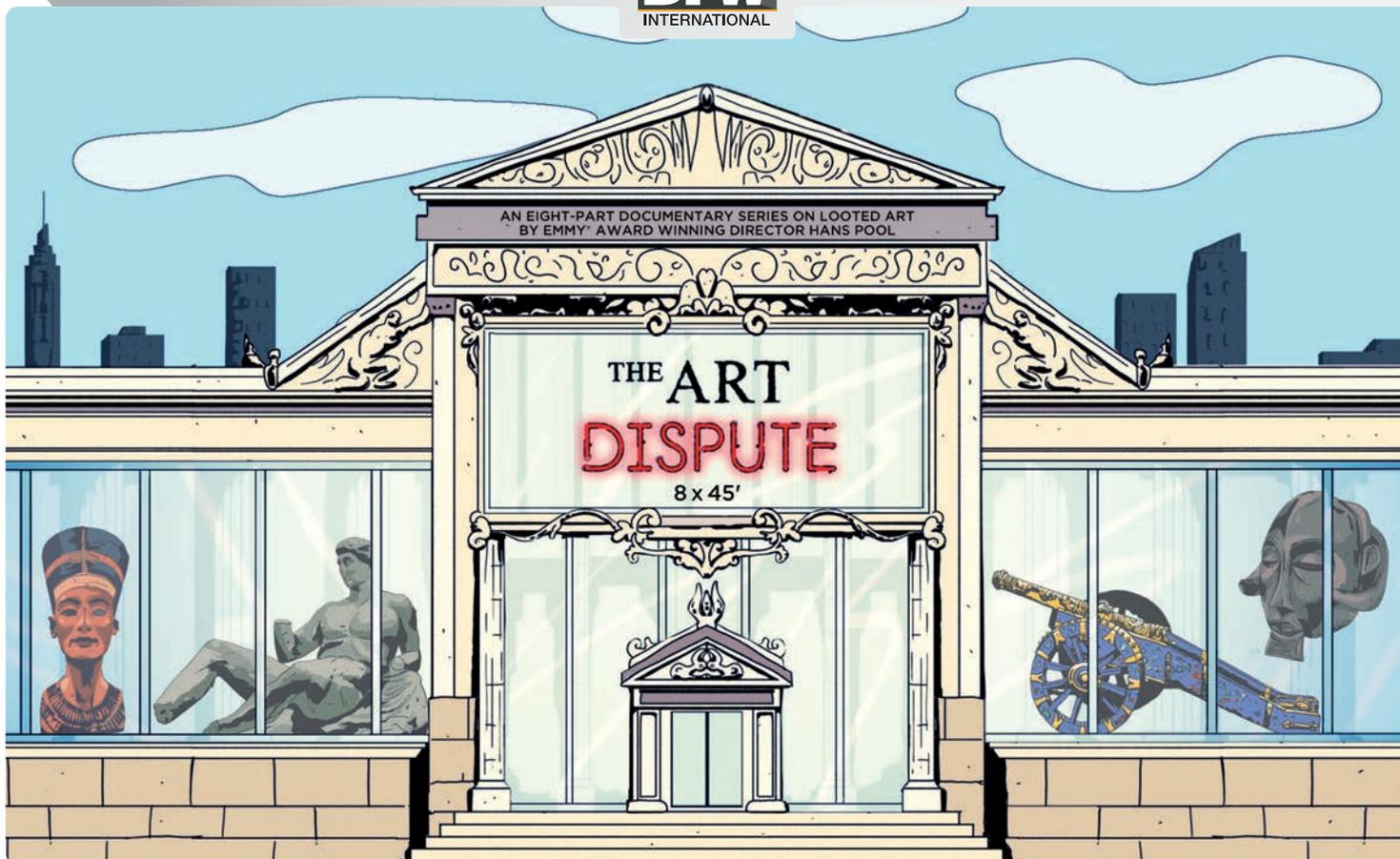
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### Look Back In Laughter

**Producer:** Yoav Gross Productions

**Distributor:** Lineup Industries

**Broadcaster:** Kan (Israel)

**Logline:** Some of the funniest people in the country tell hilarious anecdotes about relatable topics

This Israeli format sees some of the nation’s best comedians taking to the small screen to explore a variety of different but widely relatable themes – be it parenthood, adolescence or money and savings.

The assembled comedians tell stories that blend nostalgia, anecdotes and sharp observational comedy, with the producer also asking questions and showing footage to give the feel of a relaxed chat rather than an interview or a standard

‘talking heads’ show.

The original 10-part series launched last year on Israeli pubcaster Kan and has been recently commissioned for a second season, which is set to air this month.

“The tagline tells it all: ‘The funniest people telling all of our stories,’” says Ed Louwse, co-founder of Lineup Industries. “The uniqueness of this format is the perfect combination between great and funny personal stories and iconic old



footage. Meshed together, they tell the hilarious and touching story of a nation, a society, a place and time, but most of all – of people’s lives.”

Louwse says there are three core ingredients for those looking to make a local adaptation: “A diverse cast

of very funny and eloquent comedians, from all genres and generations; a focus on true personal stories and experiences rather than opinions or theories; and perfectly curated footage, either funny and bizarre, or nostalgic, cherished and meaningful moments.”

### Race Against The Tide

**Producer:** Marblemedia

**Distributor:** Distribution360

**Broadcaster:** CBC (Canada)

**Logline:** Contestants battle both one another and the tide in this sand-sculpting competition series

It’s a battle against nature in this new 10 x 30-minute competition series format. Debuting on Canadian pubcaster CBC, the original version sees 10 world-class sand-sculpting teams head

to the Bay of Fundy in New Brunswick to compete for the grand prize.

In each episode, they dig, pound and carve their way to extraordinary sculptures entirely

made from sand, looking to avoid elimination. But there is an extra catch – not only are they competing against each other, they are also racing against the incoming tide. The competitors have just six hours to finish their creations for the judges’ evaluation before the highest tide in the world washes them away.

Diane Rankin, SVP rights and executive producer at Distribution360, says the show

is “a fantastic mix of artistic skill with the added drama of the authentic high stakes created by Mother Nature herself.”

She also highlights how, as a format that is produced outside, the location becomes “as much of a character as the cast, which offers domestic broadcasters and platforms a truly local series that will feel very much ‘of their country’.”

Marblemedia, working closely with the Distribution360 team, has created a ‘turnkey’ format bible to guide producers through the process of choosing a location and, as Rankin notes, it requires precision. “There is a lot of science involved in choosing a site with a strong tidal range and timing your shoot,” she explains. “You also need that beach location to have the right type of sand – a key benefit of this format is its environmental friendliness. You want to use what Mother Nature has provided and let what was there wash back out to sea naturally.”





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## Shining a spotlight on self-financing

Fully funding a production can be a gamble for producers and distributors, but it may sometimes be the only way to get a project with clear potential off the ground. Tim Dams finds out if the risk is worth the reward

**I**f you look around the TV industry, it's not hard to find examples of producers and distributors self-financing factual content.

With broadcaster budgets under pressure but growing demand for high-end factual content, some say that self-financing factual content is emerging as a viable alternative to the commissioner-led approach.

Distributor Fremantle, for example, has recently fully funded a number of programmes before taking them to market, including two Jamie Oliver series – *Jamie's Quick And Easy Food* and *Jamie At Home* – as well as

high-end factual docs *Arctic Drift* and *Beate And Serge Klarsfeld: The Nazi Hunters*.

Newly launched distributor BossaNova is also planning to commission original factual content, building on the track record that founder Paul Heaney established at TCB Rights, where he funded many hours of factual.

UK producer Woodcut Media, meanwhile, recently fully funded and made the first episode of *Surviving A Serial Killer*, which was then picked up by Channel 4, which backed five more episodes.

And even if they are not fully funding projects,



distributors are often investing their own money to get factual programmes off the ground. DCD Rights put finance together for *Disasters Engineered* for London and LA-based producer SWR Media, bringing in pre-sales from Discovery UK for season one and investing against remaining territory sales.

German content agency Quintus Studios, meanwhile, has started funding factual programmes from indies, offsetting the risk by playing them on its own YouTube platforms such as Free Documentary – which has three million subscribers – as well as selling them to international TV buyers.

### Risk & red flags

Not all think that self-funding is a good idea though, and many warn that creating content with no home is an incredibly risky business – and something to be avoided in most cases.

**“You have to be very targeted and focused on the project and be really involved – you can go awfully wrong otherwise”**

Jens Richter,  
Fremantle International



*Arctic Drift* was backed by Fremantle partly because of the time constraints of going to market

Flame Distribution, for example, has worked on several programmes over the years where the producers have decided to fully fund their own productions. It's usually because they feel so strongly about the subject of their documentary and they've been unable to get a commission or other funding, explains Flame's content sales and acquisitions director Fiona Gilroy.

“Sometimes they are proven right and on completion their production gets acquired. However, more often than not, that doesn't end up being the case,” she explains.

Gilroy says it's now a “bit of a red flag” if a producer comes with content that has no broadcaster or platform attached. Often it just doesn't quite hit the editorial sweet spot of buyers, no matter how well made it might be.

“We have found that self-funded content tends to underperform compared to content that is commissioned or pre-sold. The value of external editorial input and guidance from the editorial team at a channel or streamer simply can't be underestimated.”

And, to be fair, those who are funding their own content would agree that it is a risky endeavour.

### Winning a £1m gamble

Fremantle International CEO Jens Richter says self-funding works in the right circumstances, but that it will never be a “mass model for production.” He adds: “You have to be very targeted and focused on the project, and be really involved. You can go awfully wrong otherwise.”

Fremantle fully funded two Jamie Oliver series, he says, because of the quality of the shows and the chef's clear brand. It had also worked with Oliver for 20 years, so had a good idea which international broadcasters would take the shows. As such, the risks of investing were clearly well balanced against the potential rewards.

On the surface, FremantleMedia's reason for investing in *Arctic Drift* seems less clear cut. Produced by Wild Blue Media, the high-end documentary follows an international team of scientists on a pioneering \$150m climate change research expedition to the Arctic, one of the most hostile and least studied environments on Earth.

Richter says the reasons for investing over £1m (\$1.38m) in the production were unique: an icebreaker with 200 scientists on it was travelling to the North Pole for 12 months and only one camera team was allowed on board. “We didn't have time to go to market, because the boat was about to take off.”

The access to a unique expedition convinced Fremantle to invest. So too did the opportunity to make a ‘once in a lifetime’ film about climate change that’s also an adventure story.

Fremantle’s investment looks to have paid off: it has since sold to 170 territories and will premiere around the time of global climate summit COP26. Fremantle has created an international movie of *Arctic Drift*, and also bespoke versions for PBS, Channel 4 and France TV, focusing on US, UK and French scientists respectively.

Richter cautions that such projects require the investment of time as well as capital. In the absence of a channel’s commissioning editor, the distributor needs to step in to help shape the project in dialogue with the producer. “If a rough cut or dailies come in, we need to look at them and to comment on them.”

### Archive add-ons

Another bet to pay off was producer Woodcut Media’s investment in true crime series *Surviving A Serial Killer*, a six-parter delving into the personal stories of people who have survived a face-to-face meeting with a murderer and lived to tell the tale.

Woodcut CEO Kate Beal says the project came about as a result of the pandemic. With production halted, Woodcut – a specialist true crime producer – started brainstorming ideas that it could make out of its archive.

Co-founder and experienced editor Matt Blyth delved into its archive to create a taster episode of *Surviving A Serial Killer* from rushes that hadn’t been used in other programmes, and also by working with

**“Self-funded content tends to underperform compared to content that is commissioned or pre-sold”**

Fiona Gilroy,  
Flame Distribution



*Surviving A Serial Killer* was put together by Woodcut Media from unused rushes and archive material – and sold in several key territories

archive companies such as Getty.

“We then took it to a number of UK broadcasters and said this is how much we need to get episodes two to six made,” recalls Beal. C4 bought in, and the series has since sold to key territories such as France, Germany, the US and Australia. “We got lucky – we more than made our money back.”

Beal says funding the doc was not a strategic decision, so much as one made out of necessity; the indie wanted to keep its team together and working during the pandemic.

Woodcut has since made another pilot episode for a show, but in a genre that it is not so well known for. Beal wants to use it as a calling card, to show broadcasters what it is capable of and hopefully win business in a new genre.

Despite the success of *Surviving A Serial Killer*, Beal can’t see distributors or indies self-funding very often. “It is just too much of a risk,” she says.

She also thinks that the ability of indies to self-fund has lessened during the pandemic. “A lot of people who would have self-funded a couple of years ago are running out of cash because of Covid. Indies have been using their reserves to get through the last 18 months. Any fat they had is gone.”

German content agency Quintus is taking a different approach. From its roots as a distributor specialising in helping to finance and sell documentaries, the company has diversified to become a channel operator, building up a number of successful documentary channels on YouTube such as Free Documentary.

With the channels starting to make money, MD Gerrit Kemming says Quintus is now helping to fund five original series from a number of producers. But it always looks to develop content that has a high sales potential on the international TV market too, as not all programmes can make their money back from YouTube revenues.

Helpfully, viewing data from the YouTube channel helps Quintus know what audiences are responding to – and what kinds of programmes are worth risking money on. The company combines this with its knowledge of the international TV marketplace to help inform funding decisions.

For Kemming, self-funding factual programming is a risk that he believes more companies will take in years to come. “The decision making process from potential commissioners or broadcasters is taking so long. If you wait to be covered for 100% of your budget, you are not able to produce at the same output level that you were able to a couple of years ago,” he explains. “If you want to grow, you need to find other ways.” **TBI**



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# Factual Hot Picks

Our selection of the top factual shows heading to market

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Top  
Pick

### Green Planet

**Producer:** BBC Studios Natural History Unit

**Distributor:** BBC Studios

**Broadcaster:** BBC One (UK), PBS (US), ZDF (Germany), Bilibili (China), CCTV9 (China), France Télévisions

**Logline:** Sir David Attenborough travels the globe, employing technological breakthroughs to delve deep into the complex lives of our world's plant life

Natural history legend Sir David Attenborough is back on screens with this latest ambitious and high-end series as he guides viewers through an exploration of our planet from the perspective of its plant life.

Travelling to the US, Costa Rica, Croatia and northern Europe, his globe-trotting journey will take in environments from deserts and mountains to rainforests and the frozen north, as he reveals how all animal life, ourselves included, is totally dependent on plants.

Rupert Barrington, series producer on the 5 x 60-minute production, reveals that the programme offers more than its fair share of surprising revelations about the natural world – none more so than that plants live much richer and more complex lives than most of us might expect.

“Plants don’t act alone, they forge intimate relationships, as friends and enemies, with other plants, animals and even with humans,” he tells TBI. “They trick, deceive and use animals for their own ends. Contrary to how it may appear, when plants and animals interact, the plant is usually in charge.”

This new series also acts as something of a follow-up to Attenborough’s 1995 BBC series *The Private Life*

*Of Plants*, making use of technological advances and over two decades of new discoveries to dig even deeper into this hidden world.

“Twenty six years after *The Private Life Of Plants* aired on BBC One, we see not only how science and technologies have advanced, but also our understanding of how plants behave and interact has evolved,” says Barrington.

“New motion-control robotics systems allow us to take a magical journey into the world of plants, in real time and in time-lapse, to watch their lives on their timescale and from their perspective,” he explains.

“Thermal cameras, macro frame-stacking to give incredible depth-of-field, ultra-high-speed cameras and the latest developments in microscopy all allow us to reveal a fresh view of the lives of plants and their incredible beauty.”

The series is also a great passion project for veteran show host Attenborough, reveals Barrington, with the show debuting at what the exec describes as a “critical time for our green world” as ecological threats have brought nature to “the brink of collapse.”

“It is therefore vital that we begin to understand and appreciate that part it plays in our world’s existence.”

### Osprey: Sea Raptor

**Producers:** Love Nature, The WNET Group, CosmoVision

**Distributor:** Blue Ant International

**Broadcaster:** Love Nature (World), Sky Nature (UK), PBS Nature (US)

**Logline:** Up close and personal look into the lives of a pair of osprey as they raise their young

*Game Of Thrones* actor Sean Bean brings star power as he narrates this 1 x 60-minute blue chip documentary, delving into the story of a pair of Osprey as they reunite, having travelled separately across continents to raise their young in a Connecticut saltmarsh.

“Natural history fans will love the up close and intimate access to the Osprey pair, shot in stunning 4K,” says Solange Attwood, EVP at Blue Ant International. “Additionally, the compelling story of how the male and female Osprey bond

and raise their young is a great co-viewing opportunity for parents seeking programming to watch with their children.”

The series follows the reunited pair as they mate and brood their eggs, while foxes, deer and scores of migrating shorebirds bring hustle and bustle back to the saltmarsh. Over the course of one summer, the two birds fend off enemies, catch hundreds of fish and raise their tiny chicks to become the next generation of sea raptors.

“This series showcases the extraordinary relationship and



characteristics of the osprey and the surrounding wildlife, which will bring audiences closer to nature and expand their knowledge of this fascinating ecosystem,” says Attwood.

The series offers some “remarkable visuals” adds the exec, with the documentary

offering intimate shots of the birds in their nest as they nurture their young.

“The innovative close-up access of the nest that the filmmaker was able to capture offers viewers a fresh perspective on this formidable and often overlooked species,” she says.

### A Girl’s Guide To Hunting, Fishing And Wild Cooking

**Producers:** Southern Pictures, Broken Yellow

**Distributor:** Flame Distribution

**Broadcaster:** SBS (Australia)

**Logline:** Acclaimed chef Analiese Gregory spends a year living off the land and learning to survive in the wilds of Australia

Celebrity chef, hunter and forager Analiese Gregory – author of cookery book *How Wild Things Are* – has achieved fame for her culinary skills, but after years of building a stellar career in some of the world’s most famous Michelin-starred restaurants, she feels somewhat burnt out, disconnected and unfulfilled.

Putting the familiar behind her, Gregory swaps it all for a small cottage in Tasmania’s remote Huon Valley, where she spends a year living off the bounty that nature provides.

“Over the course of a year, Analiese must adapt to her new life, which like her cottage is a work in progress. As she learns to live seasonally from the land, she

faces the challenge of growing her first vegetable garden and raising her own pigs for meat,” explains Fiona Gilroy, content sales & acquisitions director at Flame Distribution. “Both are huge challenges for someone who doesn’t have much of a green thumb — and who tends to ‘adopt’ her farm animals into the family! Analiese must learn to live with nature in new ways, including overcoming her life-long fear of bees.”

The series is more than just a cookery show, however, also covering issues of environment, adventure and eco-living, while Gregory learns to dive, fish, hunt and forage.

“From spearing flounder to

fly-fishing and shooting game, it’s a journey filled with life-changing ‘firsts,’” reveals Gilroy.

Cameras also capture the beauty and wildness of every encounter - from the rugged charms of Bruny Island to the isolated splendour of Lake Peder, high in the Tasmanian mountains.

“As Analiese explores these landscapes, we travel through

stunning valleys, remote beaches, tranquil lakes, ancient forests, and a myriad of island and ocean wonderlands,” adds Gilroy. “Along the way, she encounters wildlife in a range of ways – from having to deal with naughty possums to sharing her wild environments with stingrays, octopus, wallabies, and all manner of birds and fish,” the Flame exec adds.





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### The Water Guardians

**Producers:** j2f Production, LSD Films  
**Distributor:** About Premium Content  
**Broadcaster:** Canal+ (France)  
**Logline:** Four-part docuseries following ordinary people in their efforts to solve the issue of water scarcity

One of two j2f-produced documentaries that APC is launching on to the market at MIPCOM (the other is *Wanted: Women In Science*), this 4 x 52-minute nature and ecology series explores the global issue of water scarcity through stories of those who have been working to preserve or discover sources of water.

“From Polynesia to the Sahel desert, via Las Vegas and Honduras, we meet men and women who are dedicated to their cause. Each of them, drop by drop, brings tangible solutions to this vital issue,” explains Emmanuelle Guilbart, joint-CEO and co-founder at APC.

Despite the seriousness of the issue, APC describes the series as a “highly optimistic journey, full of hope and realism” that meets a doctor, a diver, a mayor,

entrepreneurs and members of NGOs – ordinary people who have become today’s water guardians.

“Did you know that you can cut coral and transplant it like any other plant to make it grow?” asks Guilbart, revealing just an inkling of the unusual and fascinating facts uncovered over the course of the series.

“Titouan, a 22-year-old young man, discovered the simplest way to save the coral reef in Polynesia islands where he lives, and gathered a community of tens of thousands of people from all over a world who support him and his team by adopting the local coral reef.

“It is amazing to see how a small localised initiative can become a worldwide movement and have a real impact on environment,” she adds.

### Black Panthers Of World War II

**Producer:** Like A Shot Entertainment  
**Distributor:** BossaNova  
**Broadcaster:** UKTV (UK)  
**Logline:** The history of the US’s first African American armoured unit, their bravery in combat and the racism they experienced back at home – despite their heroism

This one-hour special tells the story of the US’s first African American armoured unit to enter combat during World War Two – the 761st Tank Battalion.

Known as the Black Panthers, the unit proved more than capable of living up to their motto of ‘Come Out Fighting’, but as this one-off programme reveals, they had to fight not only the enemy abroad, but also at home.

In America, the members of the unit battled against the racist Jim Crow laws, fought to be heard amongst a sea of white generals and trained in an era of segregation, which saw Nazi prisoners of war have more rights than they did.

“One of the key points raised in the film is that despite the racism they faced both at home and from within the army itself, the African American men and women who served throughout

US armed forces showed incredible patriotism and a willingness to fight and even lay down their lives for the freedom of others - whilst they were faced with a lack of freedoms in their own country,” explains BossaNova CEO Paul Heaney and Danny O’Brien, head of development at Like A Shot Entertainment.

“One of the most surprising facts is that although the 761st Tank Battalion received over 390 citations for heroism, including a medal of honour and over 300 purple hearts, it was never actually intended for them to be sent into battle at all. The US military had considered them more of a PR exercise,” add the execs. “It was only as the war progressed and US losses became heavier and heavier that they were called into action, allowing to prove their worth on the battlefield.”



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# The truth is out there

Streamers have found great success with documentaries, but is a bid for bigger audiences clouding accuracy? Helen Dugdale reports

*Searching For Skylab* producers went to great lengths to ensure accuracy in their production

**E**very so often a documentary comes along that divides opinion. This year it was Netflix's *Seaspiracy* by UK filmmaker Ali Tabrizi, which explored, and some say exploited, the fishing industry's impact on sea life and the oceans.

While a lot of the media was ablaze with praise, there were other stories from NGOs and those featured in the film who weren't as happy. Tabrizi faced a rath of wagging fingers accusing him of

favouring headlines and chasing ratings above accuracy and integrity when it came to telling the real story.

It is a subject that has become increasingly discussed in the factual community, with some wondering whether filmmakers may skew the conversation to meet their PR aims and their own preferred narrative.

Thomas Viner, creative director at Pioneer Productions, the team behind *Ocean Autopsy*



and *One Hour That Changed the World*, admits *Seaspiracy* got many people fired up.

“From what I’ve read, it’s not driven by science, it is driven entirely by wanting to put across one point of view, regardless of whether it’s true or not. It’s a campaigning doc rather than a science doc. I’ve watched a number of these sort of films, and they tend to be preaching to the unconverted, they don’t usually have that much new material.”

Dwight Steven-Boniecki, the director of the film *Searching For Skylab* about NASA’s first space station that followed the Apollo program, also asks questions about the intentions of filmmakers. When it comes to US space program documentaries,

for example, he says they are often “riddled with footage from wrong missions.” Steven-Boniecki thinks they use such footage purely as eye candy rather than to maintain an accurate representation of the mission being presented.

“Apollo 14’s 16mm film of the launch of the Lunar Module is commonly used to depict the Apollo 11 launch. In *Searching For Skylab*, we went to great lengths to use only the footage that was from the theme being discussed. It is very possible to use correct footage without impacting whatsoever on the visual quality of the entire project.”

### Addressing the auteur

While using the correct footage provides accuracy for docs, the way the story is actually told has become an increasingly scrutinised aspect for filmmakers. Fiona Gilroy, content sales and acquisitions director at Flame Distribution, believes that many good documentaries express a director’s point of view and, indeed, that is precisely what makes them interesting.

“Often, it’s that very auteurship that makes the documentary. Nor is it new for documentaries to become tools for activism of some kind. A documentary filmmaker like Michael Moore for example will usually acknowledge their bias from the start. That’s fine – but if the material is manipulated to support a point of view that’s not acknowledged to an audience, the lack of transparency can lead to the assumption that there is a veracity to the content that may not be the case.”

Steven-Boniecki suggests that more factual film producers are now aware of the need for accuracy. “I like to think my audience is intelligent enough to know when they are being hoodwinked.

“Granted one or two shots may not constitute a huge betrayal of the viewer’s trust, but it is important, if for no other reason than to maintain a high level of professionalism in stories being sold on their factual basis.”

For Tabrizi, the accusation was that he chased media coverage and a coveted place in the Top 10 shows on Netflix’s gallery, something *Seaspiracy* secured in the first few days of being released. Yet Woodcut Media’s creative director, Derren Lawford, believes that most factual content makers don’t just make films because they think it might play out well in the press.

“Documentary makers usually are trying to create a story. Getting media coverage is a by-product of that. If the documentary that you’re making is investigative and is holding power to account, then

**“It is very possible to use correct footage without impacting on the visual quality of the project”**

Dwight Steven-Boniecki,  
Pernel Media



*Seaspiracy* has faced accusations of favouring sensationalism over fact



**“Internationally there is no requirement for impartiality with journalists”**

Thomas Viner, Pioneer Productions



the chances are that is going to create some sort of ripple. Or if the story that you’re interested in exploring is telling people things that they didn’t know before, that might create some sort of a splash in the press.”

Viner from Pioneer applauds the factual production companies from the UK for generally giving more respect to the people they are working with. “In the UK we have Ofcom, and the quality standards are very high. That isn’t the same across the rest of the world. Internationally there is no requirement for impartiality with journalists and treating people well.”

**SVODs impact on factual**

Whatever your opinions on *Seaspiracy*, it is unlikely that it would have had a platform if it wasn’t for the SVODs. In the early days, some among the documentary elite suggested that streamers were in danger of watering down the quality of factual content, but the opposite now appears to be true. There is an increase in demand from global audiences for more factual content, whether that is about celebrities lives or more consciously minded stories from around the world.

“Factual content is getting a lot of interest and I think streaming and frankly the pandemic has helped get a lot of voices out there. More people have come to factual programming than perhaps once did,” says Viner.

Lawford believes the influx of streamers is also raising the bar for documentary ambition. “There is more appetite for more ambitious, thought-provoking docs than ever before.

“Factual content is getting the same waves as film and drama releases and I think the world of streamers is helping the genre. There is more of a desire for diverse stories from diverse sources and that can be only good for the industry too. The bigger, the bolder and the more ambitious, the better,” he says.

So could all the publicity that *Seaspiracy* brought the genre be a good thing? Certainly the headlines, both positive and negative, attracted new and committed documentary viewers flooding to Netflix.

Gilroy from Flame certainly thinks that factual content is having a renaissance. “There seems to be a mystique amongst documentary filmmakers about getting their content up on the big streaming services. They have been at the forefront of promoting a new age for the documentary, so it stands to reason that there’s a valid appeal attached to being a part of that.

“If filmmakers are picking subjects that might be of more interest to the streamers, it is not necessarily a creative compromise. Documentaries were becoming very marginalised before channels like HBO and the big platforms took up the mantle and began to commission and promote them to a new generation,” she says. “It’s wonderful to see this new golden age.” **TBI**

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