

EUROPE'S new DOCUMENTA

European documentary makers are adapting to new market conditions by co-producing more, lessening their reliance on the 'auteur' production model, and forming alliances, whilst specialist networks are thriving, capitalising on internationalisation and economies of scale

By Jean-Fabrice Vernet

European broadcasters have always featured documentaries heavily, but now they are increasing airtime for a more commercial type of factual programming, following in the footsteps of the US.

Pay television has made possible specialist documentary channels like Discovery Europe and National Geographic Channel Europe, for whom ratings are essential. And privatisation of Europe's most watched free-to-air networks has meant that the majority of these broadcasters are now on the lookout for big audience-blockbusters in their documentary slots.

Just look at the numbers...

European networks broadcast more factual programming than Asian and American broadcasters, and are increasing their commitment to the genre. In the UK documentaries saw an increase in broadcasts of 144% this year over last. In France, where broadcasters spent 32% more on documentaries in 1998 than in the previous year.

Commensurately, local production investment increased 28% to €232 million. Exports are also doing well, despite the international trend toward docu-soaps and shock-docs, still unpopular with French producers (although not with French audiences).

In the UK Channel 4 increased its factual programming spend 34.5%, to €49.6 million this year, illustrating the increasing thirst for the genre. Forty-two percent of that expenditure, €20.5 million, was spent on non-documentary factual programming, representing an increase of 54% over last year. And public service broadcasters across the continent from the BBC to German/French educational channel Arte are also increasing their slots for the genre, the latter having recently added a British docu-soap to its programming.

Eleven new documentary channels were introduced in Europe in 1998, bringing the total to 29, compared to a mere four in 1995. There are now almost as many dedicated documentary channels as sports channels in Europe. Discovery is now broadcast on fifteen European platforms, or more platforms than any other European channel. For

its part, The National Geographic Channel is available on nine platforms.

European market events dedicated to documentaries have multiplied. MipTV, the world's largest television exhibition, has successfully held its second annual MipDoc festival immediately preceding its main April event. The Sunny Side of the Doc festival, held in Marseilles followed in June. And the punters clearly didn't have enough, as they all met again in Munich the following week for a Congress of 380 participants.

...then look at the deals

No wonder then that major players are putting big money in. Several strategic alliances have been announced involving the commercial arms of some of Europe's largest documentary broadcasters. Last year, the BBC Worldwide Ltd and Discovery Communications Inc announced a deal worth €484 million to create Joint Venture Programming (JVP), a new company forecast to become the largest global force in factual broadcasting.

In the deal, the BBC got a 50% stake in

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