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# Evolving The HD Doc

## The 17th 'Sunny Side Of The Doc' event in France focussed this year on the HD documentary. DAVE BREWIS reports on what was discussed

La Rochelle on the west coast of France was the venue for the seventeenth edition of 'Sunny Side of the Doc'. Broadcasters, commissioning editors and ever-hopeful producers descended on this beautiful old port, and for four days the business of buying and selling documentaries ensued.

Sunny Side has become a truly International market. This year a large Asian contingent represented by Japanese, Chinese and Korean broadcasters and production companies joined in the throng, searching for co-production deals and hunting acquisitions.

But the market is only one aspect of Sunny Side. Forums and Screenings invoked much discussion and debate on topics as diverse as documentary for cinema, to new media and VOD.

Inevitably this year the focus was on HD and the organisers had erected an 'HD Village' where camera manufacturers and HD post companies were encouraged to educate producers as to the ins and outs of HD production.

Also a superb auditorium equipped with HD projector and playback equipment provided the stage for the likes of NHK, Voom, the BBC and selected documentary makers to showcase their work.

### HD – the broadcasters' view

A Channel 4 International sponsored forum entitled HD Horizon 2010 was the first to tackle the subject of HD. The goal was to make independent producers aware of broadcasters' attitudes and policies towards HD, and for the forum to project where HD will be in 2010.

Voom Networks, who supply an impressive 15 channels of HD via the Dish Network in the US, were represented by Greg Moyer. "The key thing is that HD provides more of a front of seat experience, the modern viewer needs to feel more immersed in the content, and HD provides that." he enthused.

Canal+ began broadcasting HD in May 2006, in fact simulcasting their HD and SD channels. Much of the HD content is up-ressed before transmission, but more and more is commissioned and natively acquired in HD.

Takahiro Hamano of Japan's NHK gave the impression that the whole HD thing was a bit passé, and given where they are it's perhaps understandable. Today 90 per cent of content is acquired in HD since NHK started broadcasting HD in 1989, he informed us.

Interestingly Al Jazeera International, who are yet to begin broadcasting, will only commission in HD. They are to launch later this year and simultaneously stream live over the web. Georgie Weedon told an intrigued audience that although Al Jazeera is making use of higher end HD cameras, they are finding the smaller HDV cameras ideal for their subject matter. "For us successful programming depends on being close to our subject and these cameras are compact and perfect for access driven acquisition." she said.

In fact most of the panel were fairly relaxed with regard to 'what constitutes HD'. Greg from Voom stated, "We're fairly liberal about what we accept – anything with 720 lines of resolution or more". But he also pointed to the importance of the viewers' relationship with their new HD sets, and that them receiving the 'wow' experience from time to time was vital. The key to this is beautifully shot high end HD. "HD programmes can be shot more cinematically – you can hold the scene. TV can become more grand!" he enthused.

### The cost of HD

For many independent documentary producers, aside from the technical learning curve, the barrier to production has been cost.

Richard Life, Head of Programming at Channel 4 International, believes that there is a shortage of quality HD content on the market, although admits that broadcasters aren't paying a premium for documentaries shot in HD. Richard advised, "If producers are able to absorb the extra costs of producing in HD that they should, they are much more likely to sell their work: they'd be mad not to do it".

Veronique Legendre, HD consultant to Sunny Side, also believes that there aren't enough HD programmes on the market today to fulfill demand. "The message isn't getting from

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the broadcasters to the independents that they should shoot in HD," she volunteered. "HD is not something to be in awe of, it's only a new television standard – it's time to democratise HD."

Voom Networks have managed to ease the added cost burden on Indies who supply them HD content. Voom have invested in post facilities and offer to down-res their supplier's rushes to SD, allowing the independent producer to cut their show at less costly SD post facilities, before Voom carry out the conform to HD in-house.

### Inspiration

Two very different HD documentary projects that have made it through the production process provided much needed inspiration, during special screenings.

Firstly, Carrier Project (working title) is a ten hour series and companion feature length documentary shot aboard the USS Nimitz, a nuclear aircraft carrier, during a full deployment to the Arabian Gulf. The team shot hand-held over 2500 hours of HD on the Panasonic Varicam, and were given unprecedented access by the US Navy, quite a coup – especially during war time.

Secondly, BBC's Planet Earth. It is the largest international co-production on the market, produced in conjunction with NHK and Discovery Channel, and produced by the BBC's Natural History Unit.

Watching selected scenes played back from an uncompressed HD source via an HD projector, it was a privilege to see the detail and craftsmanship that perhaps wasn't so evident when the series was down-ressed and broadcast in SD in the UK earlier this year. The producers used an array of HD cameras on the project but the audience was especially struck by the clarity of the output from the 'heligimble', a helicopter mounted camera capable of shooting close ups from 1km away, vital if the goal is to not disturb and change natural animal behaviour, which would have been self defeating.

Planet Earth in one guise or another has been sold to 32 countries and counting.

### HD at the Box Office

Back on the floor there was a buzz over recent cinema box office successes for documentaries with themes ranging from wildlife to politics.

Today, in North America, in England and in France, major broadcasters all have a production unit dedicated to cinema documentaries.

The recognition that the sheer resolution of HD allows the producer to cut a series and a feature length doc for theatre release from the same rushes, is exciting for those with ambitions both in TV and cinema, and from a business perspective, for those keen to maximize revenue.

### VOD

Distribution revenue models were the primary topic in another forum entitled VOD vs DVD.

Telecoms operators, pureplay startups and established broadcast brands are entering the video on demand market. For the moment at least, confusion reigns as independent producers struggle with broadcasters over the rights and revenue associated with providing content online.

Adrienne Fréjacques from Arté revealed that their VOD site launched four months ago now boasts a library of 400 documentary and film titles. Arté negotiates rights with each producer independently, she stated. Arté's model is currently free to download and they clearly see it as a way to boost channel brand and recognition. They also have to be aware of their public service broadcasting responsibilities.

Tom Koch, Director of WGBH International, described an interesting model whereby they'd use sophisticated marketing techniques to draw people to the 'broadcast premier', then provide the content 'free to download' online for a set 'window', before removing it and making it available only as 'paid download to own'.

Independent producers are clearly wrestling with broadcasters and pureplays over this issue. They see the online/download market as providing potential new sources of revenue, and they as creators want a fair share. This is unsurprising at a time when adopting HD affects a producer's bottom line; it's no surprise they're demanding a better deal for their work.

At this stage it's clear that the HD technological revolution has a much clearer path than the VOD business revolution.

'Sunny Side' truly delivered on its promise and put HD at its centre this year. La Rochelle proved a very popular first time venue, and, given its billing, the organisers were mighty relieved with three days of uninterrupted sunshine!