

**Challenges for educational TV**

*Laura Longobardi, Project Manager, TV Department, EBU*



# Challenges

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## Public service television is constantly changing and searching for a new identity. Must educational television follow suit?

How can educational TV compete with the growing aggressiveness of commercial television, the saturation of reality formats, the internal vying for better programme slots, and new technologies?

These are not only questions for light variety departments nor are they only the concern of Saturday night shows. Competition for better market share as well as the struggle for bigger budgets and better visibility is also a reality for TV production, particularly in those areas that were once considered more protected than others: education, science and documentaries.

These particular programmes need to take advantage of new challenges, turning these threats into opportunities. Creativity and initiative must be

used not only to produce new programmes but also to attract larger audiences.

### Lagging budgets

Budgets are not keeping pace with the difficult challenges faced by producers. The global budget of broadcasters has not risen despite the launch of more channels and the digital and satellite multiplication of platforms. Unless broadcasters consider coproduction as a means of being active in ambitious projects from an earlier stage they could find themselves relegated to a buyer's role in which the only participation they can expect is purely financial.

Today's key challenge revolves around identifying the right project or the right format early in the

production process and then finding the right partner(s). The results are financial savings and holding one's own in terms of audience share.

But prior to creating successful synergies there is a nevertheless an element of confrontation that is unavoidable. If coproduction can be a solution, it can also be a nightmare to be forced to deal with the question of diversity: different approaches, tastes, cultures. Constructive ways have to be found for international cooperation to overcome these differences.

### EBU Group

Participating, networking, watching, sharing are the keywords of the EBU Science and Education Group; by getting to know each other better, we can enhance the ways we work together.

A recent survey involving nearly half of the 75 delegates who attended the EBU Science and Education Meeting in Stockholm (29 May – 1 June 2005) indicated that public service broadcasters are facing challenges and not running away from them. They are using their acquired expertise to turn this specificity to their advantage in the battle for increased audience share that is being waged against non-public service broadcasters.

for educational TV

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The survey results came up with a number of interesting points, including: local problems are often solved at international level by sharing experiences with colleagues, and, more importantly, broadcasters are able to bring projects to fruition by working with coproducers and other partners with whom they have come into contact at such meetings and thus share the costs.

The group aims to encourage broadcasters to foster this approach. Conferences are organized on a regular basis with working sessions devoted to case studies on subjects such as how to get education topics into prime time; pitching sessions<sup>1</sup> to provide opportunities to find coproduction partners; overviews of who is doing what in science and education programmes (focusing on a specific country); and screenings of the best science and educational programmes produced in Europe over the past year.

The importance of such sessions can be demonstrated by a specific case study: *L'Odysée de l'espèce* ('Man's Odyssey') and its 'sequel' *Homo Sapiens*. Coproduced by France 3, RTBF, and pre-sold to at least 10 broadcasters worldwide, both were the most successful programmes broadcast that year on France 3, regardless of genre. This case study

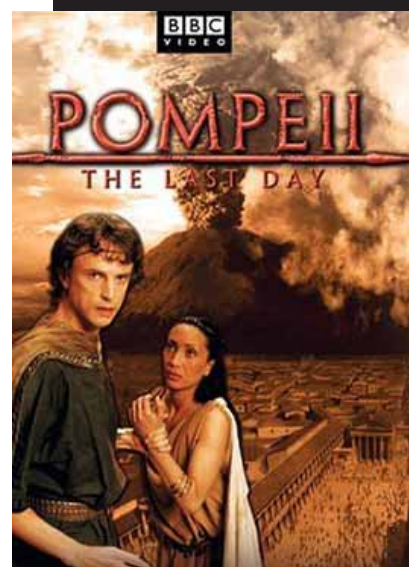
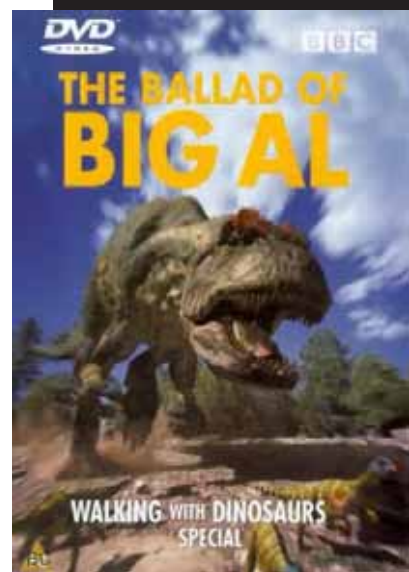
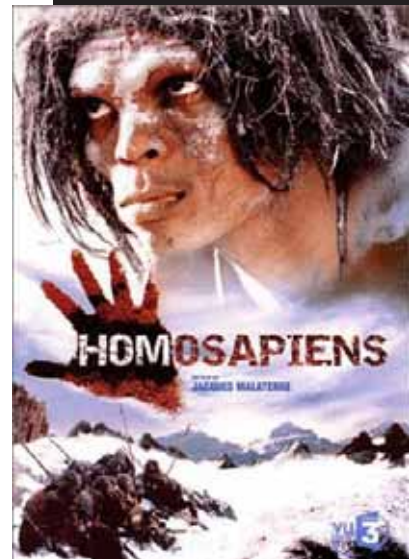
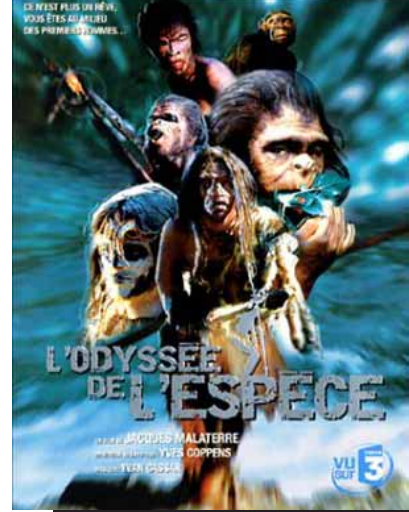
was used to illustrate how educational programmes can make it to prime time and, more importantly, attract huge audiences.

## Attracting viewers

No topics should be considered as being innately boring or entertaining. How can we make science popular? How can we titillate people's (including youngsters) interest about 'boring' subjects? How can public service broadcasters meet these challenges?

It's all about presentation, it's the storytelling that makes the difference. This is why it is so important for a group of producers to come together to discuss formats and share experiences, consolidating individuals' strengths to make one successful coproduction.

It's also about big budgets for big audiences: a relatively new phenomenon in the field of documentaries. Pioneers of this have been the BBC with programmes like *Walking with dinosaurs*, *The last day of Pompeii*; programmes that look at crucial moments in man's history and which use traditional documentary methods combined with impressive reconstructions using computer-generated imagery.





The success of screening big budget, character driven documentaries during prime time is confirmed by Arte<sup>2</sup>, the broadcaster traditionally committed to documentary and knowledge. It's a winning formula and Arte is not deviating from this strategy. Later this year viewers will be able to watch living-history programmes (the educated version of reality shows), docu-dramas as well as a variety of cross and mixed genres. One of the highlights of the autumn will be the docu-fiction on the life and discoveries of Albert Einstein (October 2005).

The EBU Science and Education Group provides broadcasters with the tools for creating an international, professional network that has a tangible advantage over its competitors. It is the first and indispensable step for establishing successful working groups. Science and education programmes that enjoy considerable success tend to be the result of big international co-productions, in which broadcasters have pooled their energy and resources. This is the way forward for public service broadcasters, this is how to face today's challenges.

## Japan Prize

*The EBU Science & Education Group is a natural partner for the prestigious Japan Prize, with which it has closely cooperated for a number of years. The Prize and the EBU have the same commitment to educational programmes, promoting the belief that educational topics can become popular and a popular TV show can be educational and inspire curiosity and a desire to know more.*

*With the slogan 'The more we learn, the further we go', the Japan Prize recompenses the best educational TV and web programmes.*

[http://www.nhk.or.jp/jp-prize/index\\_e.html](http://www.nhk.or.jp/jp-prize/index_e.html)

<sup>1</sup> *Aimed at presenting a pilot programme*

<sup>2</sup> *Joint Franco-German TV channel set up in 1991. Later concluded partnership agreements with a number of European public broadcasters.*



Pompeii - Bryulov Karl Pavlovich