

How to extend the life of your IP

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From upgrading classic dramas to recutting factual, Kate Bulkley examines how distributors and producers are getting the most from their properties in a rapidly expanding market

Every production company, broadcaster and platform is looking for the next hit series, but the television world is a complex place these days.

The amount of fresh programming being produced every year is insufficient to satisfy an increasing number of content-hungry platforms seeking to create their own distinct identity. So with plenty of gaps to fill, distributors and producers are looking to extend the life of their back catalogues and thinking more about long-tail sales for their current productions.

Cynics might call this trend ‘new money for old rope’, but

the point is that there are plenty of takers and more than enough ideas about how to make this approach work for owners of content, distributors and platforms.

Take BBC1's 2014 drama *The Missing*, for example. Seeing that it would be a multi-territory hit, as it had quickly sold to key territories including France, Italy, Germany and Spain, distributor All3Media made certain it controlled the different language versions across the board, to position it to sell the series in multiple territories.

"This isn't something we have done in the past and it has been driven by the requirements of Netflix going global," says All3Media chief financial officer John Wagener.

All3 learned a lesson when it sold Netflix the global rights to Channel 4 teen drama *Skins*. The company had to rework the language versions to be laid over the one single video asset required by Netflix.

"We felt the pain on that one," says Wagener. "We had language assets in every territory and we owned them in every territory, but they were not consistent. Netflix wanted a single video asset – that was part of the deal – so we had to conform all of our language versions. We realise that this is the new model so we need to do this from the start to future-proof that kind of property."

Clearly, adding global and multi-territory digital distributors into the mix has made the distribution environment much more complex. Zodiac Rights chief executive Tim Mutimer says that with the growth in SVoD services – both global ones like Netflix and Amazon and local ones like Sky's Now TV – you need a really good programme management team to deliver the different specs for all the platforms. "It has got a lot more complex than Digibeta and Beta SP, that's for sure," he says.

Content Media Corp president, television and digital, Greg Phillips says: "It's all about the shading."

Upgrading to HD

To tailor the content for each client, be it Netflix or a broadcaster, upgrading to higher-quality video formats is a useful tool.

Classic shows like cult sci-fi series *Andromeda*, created by Gene Roddenberry of *Star Trek* fame, or Marvel spin-off *Mutant X* can be upgraded to HD much more easily, quickly and cheaply than ever before, because costs have dropped

and the appetite for multi-episode series is huge. However, upgrading shouldn't be done "willy nilly", says Phillips. His strategy is to upgrade a couple of episodes of a series and show them to the client first to gauge appetite, rather than attempt to upgrade the entire 5,000 hours of the Content Media library. That said, 500-600 hours has already been upgraded to HD and he plans to reformat a further 200 hours in the next 18 months.

"Andromeda is 12 years old but we upgraded it two years ago and it looks better than it did the first time around: sharper, crisper and with much more vibrant colours than the original," says Phillips. "HD upgrades have given much of our catalogue a super boost; the HD version of Andromeda is now on air in most territories."

All3Media is looking to upgrade its classic shows to 4K, including ITV series *Midsomer Murders*, of which there are more than 100 episodes. Meanwhile, Two Brothers Pictures' comedy *Fleabag*, in production for BBC3 and Amazon, is being made in 4K.

Wagener says 4K delivery has not yet become standard for the company, but was something Amazon really wanted for *Fleabag* as a point of differentiation. "Netflix and Amazon have changed the mix. Their standards are very high and we are very pleased with that," he says.

Given the growth in platforms and the appeal of binge viewing, there is also huge appetite for long-running episodic drama, including US classics like *Monk*, *Remington Steele* and *Hill Street Blues*, or French drama series *Saint Tropez*, a show distributed by Zodiak Rights, part of the Banijay Group. Its massive 480-episode run is in line to be upgraded to HD when its current licences run out, says Mutimer.

Zodiak is seeing demand for higher-quality formats even with new shows such as *Wolf Creek*, a Screentime horror series made for Australian web platform Stan, which is being offered in 4K.

"It's incredibly filmic and uses those beautiful Australian landscapes," says Mutimer. "I'm not sure there are many traditional broadcasters that want 4K yet, but if you look at the development of HD, it will come, and likely certain broadcasters will pay a premium for higher quality as a form of differentiation."

Mutimer believes that distributors now need to be setting strategy right from the beginning of a production and that being part of a global group like Banijay helps to marry up the production and distribution conversation from the start. When Discovery-owned Italian digital terrestrial channel Nove commissioned dating show *Undressed*, Mutimer and his team immediately began pitching the format idea to other markets, including the UK and the Netherlands. “There are so many ideas out there that things can look old quickly, so speed to market is key,” says Mutimer. “Our mission now is to get the ball rolling from the very start on different versions in different territories, so we can exploit the ready-made programmes and work with format sales. This way, one idea can become very valuable, very quickly.” Zodiak has developed other ideas for IP extensions. The *Crystal Maze* was made for Channel 4 back in 1990, with Richard O’Brien guiding contestants through four different zones while collecting gold tokens. It was once voted the best UK television gameshow of all time. Last year, Zodiak licensed the concept to an events company, which has staged a live participatory *Crystal Maze* event in London. “It’s a first for us and it’s a significant revenue stream,” says Mutimer.

Recutting factual

Recutting factual series is another way to reinvigorate a library, says Philips, but the key is usually topicality. A documentary about Hills borough, for example, can be repackaged with a new introduction or recut for a significant anniversary, or in the case of a court ruling. “We’ve not really taken one of these forward yet, but we are looking closely at our catalogues,” says Mutimer.

The future success of shows like Canal+ period drama *Versailles* will be partly down to this idea of understanding the long-term income potential of the show, which is complicated by the demand from global platforms like Netflix.

Zodiak sold the UK rights to *Versailles* – reportedly the most expensive French series ever at €3m (£2.4m) per one-hour episode – to BBC2 and a second window to Amazon Prime. The programme broke all viewing records for Canal+ in France and has now been sold to more than 130 countries. “The growth of the global platform represents a challenge

for us, as they often want a bigger window than we are used to selling,” says Mutimer.

“I wouldn’t want to strike a global deal with one of my big properties like Versailles because the model doesn’t exist yet – but that might change.”

Eventually, the mobile telephone market will also be significant for TV sales. New companies like Studio Plus, launched at Mip TV in April by Vivendi Content, are already creating premium mobile content for these platforms so recutting classic programmes or selling format rights to make shorter-form mobile content also has potential.