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Co-Production: Communication Can Make It Work

By

Clara Choi
Coproduction:
communication can make it work

Presented by: Clara Choi
Introduction

The term -- "coproduction" -- is very new to RTHK. Our first project in TV coproduction was the ABU TV Coproduction Series 1993. The title of this series is "Food and People in Asia and Pacific Region" with twelve broadcasting organisations in this region participated in this project. Actually, the ABU Coproduction Series has been started since 1986. When we first received the invitation letter from ABU, the head of our documentary section immediately went ahead to this coproduction project which was totally new for us at that time. The format of ABU coproduction is kind of programme exchange. The topic is decided by ABU, all participating organisations will make their own episode according to the umbrella topic and under a unified approach and programme style. After all partners complete their episodes they will exchange all episodes among themselves, i.e. each partner will receive the whole series for screening at the end of the project.

In the next year, a Canadian independent production house approached RTHK to coproduce a one hour documentary on the Chinese illegal immigrants in North America. The coproduction format this time was different from the ABUs. Five parties were involved in the production of this documentary -- the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the National Film Board of Canada and the Arts and Entertainment Network provided the funding, Stornoway
Productions was responsible for the research and the whole production, RTHK provided a producer and a film crew to assist the filming in Hong Kong. In return, RTHK got the longest version of this documentary for re-editing and to make it into a half hour documentary for our Hong Kong audience. In the same year, Film Australia also invited RTHK to take part in their “Family” coproduction series. Their coproduction format is similar to the ABUs. Suddenly we found ourselves overwhelmed with this term -- “coproduction”. Until now, RTHK have completed four coproduction projects, two in research and development stage and another two in the exploratory stage.

From the simple fact that we have participated in eight coproduction projects within a short period of two years, I think one can easily conclude RTHK's attitude towards coproduction. Yes, we like the concept of coproduction and we buy this idea. Although we cannot say that coproduction provides an ideal solution to the problem that we are facing now, such as budget cut, globalisation of information, audiences demand for more informative programme; it has never been an idle dream. Coproduction provides an economical way for programme making and creates a new area in our programming. Before I am going to the details of this stance, I would like to explain to you first the reasons why RTHK goes for coproduction.
The primary objective is to look at the outside world through this little window of coproduction. There is a Chinese saying, "Sitting at the bottom of a well to watch the sky". Of course, how much that we can see depends entirely on how big the well is. Our wise ancestor reminded us to broaden our horizons or we would become complacent. This philosophy can also apply in the TV production. Our documentary series has been run for almost 17 years. We always demand ourselves to make better programmes or to explore new format or new approach to make programmes. We find that the process of self evolution is slow and with limitation. We are always curious to know how other documentary producers in the rest of the world make their programmes. Through coproduction, we have the chance to work with other TV producers. We hope that throughout the working process, we can see how they work and to show them how we work. This is a kind of professional and cultural exchange.

The second objective concerns the money. Most of the broadcasting organisations involved in coproduction would agree that coproduction is an economical way in programme making. Just compare the cost for an overseas production with the cost of a home production we can easily figure out the difference, for example, in RTHK the production cost for a home documentary production is around US$20,000 and the production cost for an overseas production is from US$30,000 to US$35,000. Therefore in the case of one and one programme exchange, i.e. one home
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production vs. one overseas production made by your partner, RTHK can save up to US$ 15,000 in production cost. The difference that we have just mentioned might amounted up to four, eight or twelve overseas productions to one home production; depends on how many partner is involved and how many episode is selected from the series.

The third objective is to provide the audience with alternate kinds of documentary. Through coproduction, it will widen not only the producer's perspective to TV production, audience will be benefited as well. The world is getting smaller with the development in communications, people at the present day have greater interest in what is happening in other parts of the world. Coproduction programmes not only reflect the different perspectives among the participating partners towards one designed topic, it also reflects the culture and the standard of programme making in various countries.

**Personal comments from a new comer**

I have been a documentary producer for six years in RTHK. My first experience in coproduction was the ABU's "Food and People" Coproduction Series 1993. As I mentioned before, it was also the first attempt of RTHK. Last year I was assigned to assist the production of "Dragons of Crime" with the Stornoway Productions and now, I am just coproducing with twelve broadcasting organisations on an economic topic.
The first comment that I will give to coproduction is -- "lots of paper work and a long communication process." I was given a booklet published by the East-West Center in an ABU Producers' meeting. The title of this booklet is "Coproduction in International Television: Making the marriage work". The writer, Mr. Leo Eaton started his article with this sentence -- 'The idea of coproduction is very good, very necessary. All of us know why it is necessary. It is the sort of the thing that senior executives and broadcasters around the world say, "Ah yes, we must do it", and assume that just by saying it, they can make it happen. But if we are going to be honest, no producer really likes doing coproductions. They're difficult, they're complicated and they cause a lot more work.'

As a producer and from my experience, I fully support Mr. Eaton's observation. Coproduction is indeed difficult, it is complicated and most of all they cause a lot of paper work. It takes longer production time than a regular production. In RTHK it usually takes six to eight weeks for each producer to finish a half hour documentary. That means if a producer works hard enough and everything runs smoothly, he/she can produce six or seven programmes a year. As for coproduction, the number will be greatly reduced to two. Actually, the production itself does not need more time than a regular programme, it is the discussion process that takes time.
The word -- "coproduction" means to produce something together with someone. When you have to work with others you need to discuss and negotiate with your partners in order to get the consent to work together. Just imagine how many steps are involved in a programme production and that every step you want to take has to inform all your partners and wait for their comments.

I remembered the first communication theory that I came across in my school days was the communication process. A sender transmits a message to a receiver, the receiver will decode the message and response to the message by sending out his feedback to the sender. It is so called a complete communication process and I find that it plays a very important role in coproduction. When making a programme, I am sure we will bear audiences' interests in our mind. We will roughly have an idea what interests them and how much they want to know about the subject. However, when we are going to coproduction, we have to fill in the blank by our own imagination or depend on the feedback from our partners. I have attended a coproduction producers' meeting recently, in which all members agreed that feedback is an important part of the coproduction process. Although the feedback process takes time and involves a lot of paper work, I think it is both necessary and unavoidable. In my opinion, expect and respect comments from our partners and send our comments to them are equally important in a successful coproduction because we all want to find a way
to satisfy both our audience and make the coproduction works.

My second comment to coproduction is --"it is full of fun but at the same time causes a lot of frustration." I don't think I need to explain how enjoyable it is to work with our counterparts from all over the world. I would rather share my frustration with you. In production meeting members tend to show their enthusiasm for the coproduction project and commit themselves easily to the requirements and deadlines of the production schedule. In many cases, when the producers go back to their offices they will be occupied with their normal work and easily forget their commitment. However, we have to remember that coproduction is a joint project, if one member is late for his episode, the whole series will be tied up. It is a pity that this problem is very common in coproduction. I think penalty system should be introduced to tackle this problem.

Is it worth participating in coproduction?

Coproduction in a way is not as productive as regular production because it takes time and energy in the non-production work. In this case, we have to ask a question -- "Is it worth participating in coproduction project?" I guess the answer from the senior executives is definitely 'yes because we spend money for one home production and in return we can get many overseas productions from your partners. Even if not all of the
exchanged programme are suitable for screening, we can still find some, e.g. in the ABU’s “Food and People” Series, we have chosen four episodes among a total episode of twelve; and in the Film Australia’s “Family” Series, we have selected four among ten episodes. In both cases, RTHK produced one local documentary and received three extra overseas programmes to screen. In RTHK the production cost for a half hour overseas documentary production is about US$30,000 to US$35,000. Last year we put six exchanged programmes on screen which thus meant that we have saved up to US$210,000 in our overseas production cost.

Most importantly, audience’s feedback on the exchanged programmes is positive. Until now, we have put all the coproduction programmes in our regular documentary time slot which is from seven to seven-thirty at Sunday or Monday evening. The average audience rating of our documentary is 23% with an average audience size of 1.2 million. Four episodes of the ABU’s “Food and People” Series were shown in last August with a screening order of CCTV, KBS, SBS and RTHK. In last January, four episodes of the “Family” Series were shown, this time we began with our own production first, then Film Australia, POL NET (Poland) and TV Cultural (Brazil).

In Hong Kong, we seldom put foreign documentary programmes in the Prime Time slot of Chinese Channel. However, in both the cases of “Food and People series and
“Family” series, we found our audience rating remained quite constant without any significant drop. Moreover, in the survey organised by the TV and Entertainment Licensing Authority, members from the TV viewing groups commended the high-quality productions of these two coproduction series.

As for the production itself, we find our coproduction partners always supply us with some interesting programme which is beyond our knowledge and imagination, for example in the “Food and People” Series, NHK made a programme about the “Hamburger in Japan” and CCTV provided us with a programme on the old simple eating habit for longevity. Imagine that RTHK had to make her own “Food and People” Series, we would easily fall into the prophecy of choosing Sushi or Soba as the subject to represent Japan, and exotic or medicated dishes for China. As a matter of fact, we shall not deny the fact that local people is better informed about their own country than any foreigner. Our coproduction partners will be a great help in providing some interesting and in-depth programmes of their own countries.

Why don’t we put all the coproduction programmes on air to maximize the benefit?

After viewing all the final cuts from our partners, to be honest, we were quite disappointed because at least half of the programmes were not suitable for Prime Time
screening. Pacing and format are the two biggest problem.

Pacing: If you have a chance to watch a Hong Kong movie, probably you would have an impression of how fast the pace is in Hong Kong's media. We are usually complained by our partners that the pacing of our productions is too fast and tight. Some partner is horrified by our fast going programme and at the same time, we are not used to their slow moving scenes. I remembered one of the producers in the ABU producers' meeting mentioned that fasting cutting programme is not considered as documentary, it is feature; documentary has to be slow. Personally, I do not agree with this remark but it does reflect different attitudes in programme making.

Programme format or style: We find that documentary in Hong Kong follows the style of American which come from a drama background. We prefer to follow a character with dramatic story development to tell the whole story and thus use more first person narration in our programme. On the other hand, many of our partners in Asia prefer the Japanese way of documentary which tends to be more informational. Facts come first, visual arrangement and storytelling technique are less important. They prefer to use a third person narration and use less upsounds.

Although we appreciate a variety of different formats and styles of production in a series we must confess that the quality of some production has been
fallen behind and is not suitable for Prime Time screening. For those with too many pauses and long slow-moving scenes, usually we have to produce cut-downs or to tighten up the programmes before showing them to our audience. In order to suit domestic interest, post production is an important step in coproduction as to refine the exchanged programme and to make it more interesting for our own audience.

Conclusion

When we look back to the objectives that we have set for coproduction, I guess my senior executives will be happy because we have got all we want. In fact, after a period of trial, we are planning to programme all new coproduction series in a separate time slot. It thus will increase the total outputs of our production at a very low budget.

As a producer, I do treasure the opportunity to listen to and discuss with other foreign TV producers and I am glad that RTHK's productions were well received by our coproduction partners. This kind of acquaintance can develop into another coproduction partnership. From our experience, to work with old partners is definitely an added value in coproduction because the goodwill and mutual understanding established in one project can lead to a better chance of success in the future. Coproduction is just like ballroom dancing. The reason for me to draw these two things together is that in both
cases, good partnership is very important, and, the longer we dance with our partner, the more harmony and beauty will be in our performance. Of course, a precondition of the above statement is -- we have already found a good partner. If we fail to establish a mutual trust and understanding with our partners, it is unlikely that both of us can work or dance well together. If our partner always falls behind us or vice versa, then we certainly cannot make a good partnership. In this case, we have to decide whether to tolerate the situation, or to adjust our footsteps to suit our partners, or to terminate the partnership. Do not force ourselves to carry on the task because if we feel bad about the joint effort, it will not work well.

For our own part, I think it is again very important and necessary that we should have a pair of good ears for both cases. When we dance we should listen carefully to the music and swing our body to the beat. When we coproduce with our partners, we also need to pay attention to the requirement of the coproduction project and respect our partners' comments and feedback.

Mr. Leo Eaton concluded his opinion on coproduction with this sentence -- "If coproduction is indeed like an arranged marriage, then those who succeed in such a marriage are those who work at making it work. Those who don't, lose out." I share Mr. Eaton's opinion and I believe that coproduction is not an idle dream,
communication can make it work.
Notes:

1. The twelve broadcasting organisations participated in the ABU TV Coproduction “Food and People” Series 1993 are -- SBS (Australia), BTV (Brunei), CCTV (China), IRIB (Iran), NHK (Japan), KBS (S. Korea), MBC (S. Korea), SLRC (Sri Lanka), SBC (Singapore; SBC has changed her name to TCS in 1994), GMA (Philippines), RTM (Malaysia) and RTHK (Hong Kong).

2. The ten partners in the “Family” Series are -- Film Australia, NHK (Japan), KBS (S. Korea), TV Ontario (Canada), TVNZ (New Zealand), CEC (India), FOL NET (Poland), TV Cultura (Brazil), Sovtelexport (Russia) and RTHK (Hong Kong).


4. Audience ratings of the “Food and People” Series:

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<th>Audience rating</th>
<th>Audience size</th>
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<tr>
<td>CCTV (China)</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>1.23 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KBS (S. Korea)</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>1.18 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>SBS (Australia)</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>1.35 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTHK (Hong Kong)</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>1.23 million</td>
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Audience ratings of the "Family" Series:

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<tr>
<td>RTHK (Hong Kong)</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>1.1 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film Australia</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>1.1 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POL NET (Poland)</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>1.23 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TVCultura (Brazil)</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>1 million</td>
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