

# 10 INTER-INSTITUTIONAL CO-OPERATION IN MULTIMEDIA PRODUCTION

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Any multimedia production intended for use by a wider audience than that of the immediate production team, requires an investment of substantial material and financial resources if it is to have any chance of standing up to that most critical of audiences - the paying public!

The awesome power of multimedia technology gives a properly funded and resourced production the capacity to encompass and present an entire field of knowledge in some considerable depth, rather than an inevitably shallow treatment necessitated by the essentially-restrictive conventional media of books and television. Consider, for example, three classic BBC documentary series: Jonathan Miller's "The Body in Question" (transmitted in 1978), David Attenborough's "Life on Earth" (tx 1979), and Michael Andrews' "The Birth of Europe" (tx 1991). When we, as multimedia producers, consider the enormous budgets which must have been expended in producing these definitive examples of the television documentary, we can enjoy a 'flight of fancy' in thinking how we might have spent the same sums had we been asked to address the same subject through a multimedia rather than television production. Granted, we could not yet hope to achieve the same audience figures, but just imagine how much deeper we could have explored the subject, and how much more imaginatively it could have been presented.

Take "Life on Earth" - a thirteen part television series produced by the BBC, taking over three years to film, involving over one and a half million miles of travel, and costing no small fortune to produce. Sir David Attenborough described the series as one of the most ambitious projects ever undertaken by British television, and both the series and the book have received much well-deserved praise. In his introduction to 'the book of the series' Sir David says:

*The condensation of three thousand million years of history into three hundred pages, the description of a group of animals containing tens of thousands of species within one chapter, compels vast omissions. My method has been to try and perceive the single most significant thread in the history of a group and then concentrate on tracing that, resolutely ignoring other issues, no matter how enticing they may seem.*

The television series, however educational and entertaining, remains just that - a television series with a linear narrative broken into 'programme-sized' episodes. As an educational resource - for all its expense - it is difficult if not impossible to access in any useful way, and the "vast omissions" declared by the author render the series, and for that matter the book, of little use as a reference work. It must be said that the series was never intended to be a work of reference for students and scholars, and I am not suggesting for one moment that "Life on Earth" should not have been made as a television series. It is just that I find it interesting - if for no other reason than as a purely academic exercise - to consider what could be done today should a similar budget be available.

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## The need for inter-institutional co-operation

Had the same money been used to create a multimedia production on the subject of "Life on Earth", and had there been a large-enough and well-established user base of one multimedia format, the resulting resource would be of greater long-term use to a larger number of people than the television series could ever hope to be. Incidentally, the affordable publication of such a production would make progress in helping to establish multimedia in the domestic environment rather than it being the prerogative of the educational environment.

Photographs of thousands of species could have been included with detailed reference notes on the species' size, numbers, habitats, breeding patterns, and food. They could be grouped by order, family and genus, by geographical territory, by type of habitat, by food type, etc. In addition, hundreds of audio recordings of the 'sounds of life' could be included. For linear use, links or 'storylines' could have been made between species to provide a conventional narrative structure not unlike that of a book or television programme, illustrating the development of species or orders, diversity of species, the structure of food chains, looking at species farmed by man, species and their hosts, their ecology, species appearing in legend, threatened species - the possibilities are endless.

It would probably be impossible for any single organisation to even contemplate undertaking such a mammoth project, especially if new location photography and film sequences were to be commissioned. Obviously, in today's financial climate - even if the 'green shoots' of economic recovery have been glimpsed - finding an organisation with sufficient resources, and a willingness to invest them in such a project, are slim to say the least!

The only alternative would be for a group of institutions and organisations - all involved in some way with natural history - to 'join forces' and pool their resources and expertise. Indeed, as multimedia projects become more innovative and adventurous in subject and content as well as production values, there are fewer and fewer projects than can be tackled by a single institution.

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## Finding a partner with whom to co-operate

Having identified the need for co-operation, simply finding an institution willing and able to join forces could easily prove to be a 'partnership of disaster' if some quite elementary questions had not already have been asked. There is nothing very clever, or earth-shatteringly original about these questions, but the answers to them should point the way towards one's 'ideal partner'. In fact, the questions are nothing more than common sense, but it is worth putting them down on paper simply to have them in a form in which they can receive further discussion, especially as to how they have worked in practice for anyone who has worked as part of a co-operative project. In many cases there is considerable overlap between the questions, but the broad areas of enquiry can be accommodated in five questions.

**Question One: Why co-operate at all?** There are several advantages to this, some of which have been mentioned earlier. In addition to the pooling of material and financial resources, and perhaps the merging of collections and research, co-operation between institutions can lead to a much stronger project team with 'new blood', different working practices, and additional or complimentary skills. With international collaborations, it can be enormously rewarding and enjoyable for staff to experience professional and social cultures that are quite different from their own.

If outside capital is being sought, a partnership between institutions can increase investor confidence whilst at the same time increase buying power and limit the risk to the individual partners.

**Question Two: *What form of collaboration is required?*** If it is simply a case of 'many hands make light work', remember that 'many hands cost more than fewer hands' and the strain on what may be an inexperienced project management team might be fatal to the project. Alternatively, areas of collaboration can be identified, and work in that area led by one or other of the partners as appropriate, rather than the largest or richest partner automatically taking charge.

It could be that a potential partner has greater academic expertise or experience, or that they have a particular flair for conceptual or design tasks. Of course, an institution venturing into the commercial environment for the first time might be seeking a business partner with experience of that particular market, but a word of caution: the commercial environment can be a dangerous place - it is all too easy to lose the lion's share of a project's potential profits to a cut-throat business partner!

**Question Three: *How will the co-operation work in practice?*** Partners in a co-operative venture can begin with every good intention, but as the project develops or problems occur - as they invariably will - communication breaks down, partners don't know what the others are doing, tensions rise and the productivity curve takes a nose-dive! It is essential - at the very outset - to decide exactly how the co-operation will work in practice.

Maybe the co-operation will begin and end with jointly-funded academic research, or go on to include co-operation at the concept or design stage of the project. Does one partner second a member of staff (or more) to the other partner's institution, or do regular team meetings take place whilst in the interim period each member of that team gets on with their own clearly identified tasks? Whatever method is adopted it is absolutely essential for the partners to keep in regular contact, and for each to inform the other as to what is happening, or of problems that have arisen. Weekly progress reports, and monthly status reports may seem awfully bureaucratic, but they will go a long way to securing a harmonious working relationship.

**Question Four: *Where should the co-operation take place?*** Having identified the form of cooperation that is required, it is necessary to decide where that co-operation should take place. The form may dictate the location - if one partner has an extensive library and experienced team of researchers, then it is desirable that the research is done in that partner's institution supported by one or more seconded researchers from the other. Similarly, one partner may already have an excellent working relationship with a video production company, and it is therefore perhaps advantageous for the audio and video production and master tape origination to be done by that company under the direction of a member of staff from either institution.

Concerning the project administration meetings, their frequency can be reduced, and their usefulness increased, if regular progress and status reports have been filed. However, are the meetings held in one institution or the other? Again, this may be decided by the facilities that each institution can offer for such meetings. With an international project, it is important to budget substantial sums for travel to and from meetings. Indeed, the travel and administration budget can often be the largest within an overall project budget.

**Question Five: *Who should one co-operate with?*** Finally, this question can be answered. Having answered the preceding four questions, it should now be possible to identify a suitable partner with whom to co-operate on a particular project - it may be an international organisation, a government ministry, a public institution, a private company, a particular department or section within an institution, or any combination of these.

Whatever is decided, each partner should contribute towards the creation of a Partnership Agreement which states clearly and concisely **why** that cooperation is taking place, **what** form that co-operation should take, **how** that cooperation shall work, and **where** that co-operation should take place. The Agreement, signed by all partners, should also include exact details of how profits or losses should be apportioned. Needless to say, professional legal advice should be sought.

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### ***The World of the Vikings - An example of inter-institutional co-operation***

A recent multimedia project that required great co-operation between an enormous number of institutions resulted in **The World of the Vikings**. Essentially an Anglo-Danish co-production - in which the York Archaeological Trust (in the UK) and the National Museum of Denmark sought to produce the definitive archive of Viking life and culture. This could only be achieved with the co-operation and assistance of dozens of other institutions spread across the northern hemisphere.

Both organisations had previous multimedia production experience (videodisc), and both had access to a wealth of Viking-age material and academic work, but neither organisation had sufficient resources - academic, material or financial - to contemplate undertaking such a venture on their own. Simply joining forces was not the answer either. An ordinary two-party collaboration between the two institutions would not provide access to material outside of Denmark or the United Kingdom, neither would it provide the essential marketing and distribution expertise that would be necessary if **The World of the Vikings** was to succeed in reaching a wider audience.

As the planning of the project progressed, it became clear that three different forms of cooperation would be necessary if the project was to stand any chance of success.

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**Fig. 1** The World of Vikings



photo: Simon I.Hill

Firstly, there was the co-operation between the York Archaeological Trust and the National Museum of Denmark - the principal project partners. Such co-operation was the intention of both institutions from the outset, since this would be advantageous in many ways, not least of which being the immense respect and esteem in which each is held by museums and academic institutions around the world. The fact that these two august institutions were collaborating was reason enough for the dozens of other institutions to part with their treasured library of photographs, or provide access to their collections of artefacts for the purpose of newly-commissioned photography.

This second means of co-operation, although often working most successfully on a personal, one-to-one level between an academic member of the project team and an acquaintance from the particular institution being contacted was perhaps the most important means of co-operation in the entire project. Without it, **The World of the Vikings** would not be the *world* of the Vikings at all!

A third means of co-operation occurred between the project partners and a marketing and distribution company. Although the project partners were committed to producing **The World of the Vikings** (irrespective of the project's ability to make a profit) for use in their respective organisations, both were keen to see it used more widely. This was of particular interest to the project partners since they were convinced that such wider use would prove to be financially advantageous to the project, thereby providing additional funds for further development of the project.

Eventually, after a number of specialist marketing and distribution companies had been considered, Past Forward Ltd, the heritage presentation specialists, agreed to take on that aspect of the project. Furthermore, thanks to entrepreneurial investment in Past Forward on the strength of **The World of the Vikings** project, the company was in a position to contribute financially to the project in order to provide a more imaginative and academically-thorough product.

The co-operation between the principal project partners began with a *Joint Project Committee* consisting of two senior staff from each institution. This committee created the overall project brief and passed this to a *Project Outline Research Team* whose task it was to devise the broad subject areas that would become the backbone of **The World of the Vikings**. Meetings of these two teams alternated between York and Copenhagen.

The detailed research was undertaken by two researchers - one appointed by the National Museum of Denmark, the other by the York Archaeological Trust - under the direction of the *Joint Project Committee*. Additional research, not planned for during the initial project design, became necessary. This was eventually undertaken by three part time researchers - one in York, two in Copenhagen.

Working to the initial brief of the *Joint Project Committee*, and under their direction, the interactive software creation, the video production, the audio production, the computer animations and graphic design were produced by the York teams. The two researchers would often accompany the film crews on location, and similarly provided a direct contribution to the other tasks. In planning for this work, those responsible for its production would meet with the *Joint Project Committee* in Copenhagen or York as appropriate. With the computer programming, additional work was carried out by a team of four programmers - one in York and three in Copenhagen. Frequent meetings of this team, in Copenhagen, were necessary. Much of the photography, which included substantial amounts of newly-commissioned material, was taken by the principal project photographer from the York team supported by a photographer from the Copenhagen team. Additional photography was produced by two photographers based in York, under the direction of the principal project photographer.

Text editing is always a complicated and drawn-out process. Because of this, the text editing team was the largest team on the project, with four editors in York and three in Copenhagen.

Videodisc mastering was undertaken by two video production companies a division of the Danish Broadcasting Corporation in Copenhagen, and The Scirebróc Group in York. These two organisations were under the direction of the *Premastering Coordinator*, a member of the Danish team at the National Museum, in Copenhagen.

Administrative support to the project teams was provided by two staff - one in York, one in Copenhagen. The York teams also required additional support which was provided by an administrative assistant.

A recent co-operation concerning **The World of the Vikings** has occurred between Past Forward Ltd and the Council of Europe. The Council's *Cultural Routes Programme* includes a "Viking Route" and the Director of the Cultural Policy and Action Division has endorsed **The World of the Vikings** as being "...the publication of the Viking Route of the Cultural Routes Programme of the Council of Europe". As a result of this, Past Forward and the Council of Europe are working together to publish more of the Routes as multimedia publications.

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## Conclusion

Co-operation between institutions for the production of multimedia projects is becoming a necessity. Care must be taken as to how that co-operation is managed. There are potential pitfalls, but these are far outweighed by the many advantages of working with a partner, or partners.

If there is one aspect of co-operation that must be stressed, it is that of *communication*. The partners, who may be in a different country, or continent, must keep in touch, reporting on problems and failures as well as the successes.

As time goes on, and multimedia projects become more adventurous, we will see an increasing number of co-operating institutions. Those that are already doing so, or are soon to begin doing so, will learn from mistakes early on and so be in a stronger position to link-up with other institutions in the production of new and exciting multimedia projects.

