

whale of an edit

Sep 24, 2010 12:00 PM

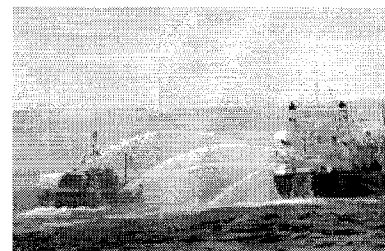
Postproduction efficiency on *Whale Wars*.

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It would seem that Liz Bronstein never sleeps. As executive producer of Animal Planet's *Whale Wars*, Bronstein oversees the creation of the dramatic documentary series, which is set in the remote Southern Ocean off the coast of Antarctica. It is there that the small fleet of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, an anti-whaling activist group, actively attempts to thwart the efforts of Japanese whaling vessels. Violent storms, equipment breakdowns, and fierce clashes between boats are the norm. This season, a Sea Shepherd boat was so significantly damaged in a collision that it sank in the icy cold waters.

Bronstein has seen her share of expansive, complex productions (*Joe Millionaire*, *Project Greenlight*), but this documentary series, which just wrapped its third season, is different. "These are real people, risking their lives in some of the most dangerous seas in the world," says Bronstein, who sent 16 cameramen and producers out on the boats this season to capture the action. "From the minute the boats leave until they come back 90 days later, I have a stomach ache."

That is just the beginning of the storytelling challenges. With as many as seven HD cameras (**Sony HVR-Z1U** and **HVR-Z7U**, and **GoPro** helmet cameras for work on the bridge) rolling on each of three boats nonstop this season, the crew shot approximately 1,600 hours of footage on 2,400 tapes and captured 170 hours of interview material. Just getting the tapes into post is difficult. Tapes are mailed to Los Angeles for post work only when the ships come into port for refueling. "We had to push out post for three weeks [this season] because the boats stayed out longer on their first leg. It's all very unpredictable," Bronstein says. "You put together a schedule, but it is always changing. A lot of *Whale Wars* is about being flexible."



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Hauling in the story

Once tapes are received in Los Angeles, they are digitized using 10 **Avid Media Composer** workstations running in parallel for quick ingest into a 16TB **Avid Unity** shared-media network. A team of nearly 20 postproducers and editors then start logging, organizing, and assembling the 1-hour episodes using 18 **Avid Media Composer** systems.

Many nonfiction producers, particularly those who work on reality television, know their story arcs in advance. Not on *Whale Wars*. "This show is about real people in a real situation, not about real people living in an artificial construct, say, a game structure where conflict is created," says co-executive producer Sean Foley. "We have no natural structure. Only the drama of what actually happens."

To get a handle on potential story arcs as early as possible to prepare for post, producers on shore speak nearly daily with the producers on each boat. The sea-based producers also send field notes along with their tapes to give more detailed insight into real developments as they happen. With this information, producers in Los Angeles begin sketching the big picture story arc for the season, and then start breaking it down into pieces to create story beats and to identify cliffhangers at the end of each episode.

Because each episode is created in approximately six weeks from rough cut to network delivery, it's essential that the post team manage the massive amount of material efficiently. To save time, producers use their own **Avid Media Composer** software to create string outs for the editors as a starting point for each episode. They rely heavily on the **Avid ScriptSync** feature, which phonetically indexes dialogue to sync source clips automatically with the script. Producers can call up selected takes quickly from any angle just by typing in a line or phrase from the transcript. They then put the string outs in work bins on the **Avid Unity** system for the editors to pick up.

Without **ScriptSync**, the team says, it would be nearly impossible to manage the show's 2,000:1 shoot ratio in a time-effective way. Producers would have to look at the transcript using third-party software, collect a list of the desired sound bytes, have an assistant source the tapes, and then search through the footage to find the clips they want. This could take minutes or even hours. With **ScriptSync**, producers can find clips in seconds without leaving the **Media Composer** system and save hours of search time per episode that can be better spent on more creative editing.

"**ScriptSync** takes a six-step process and makes it a one-step process," says lead editor Pete Ritchie about the productivity gains the editing team has realized with script-based editing. "I'm not sure we could do this big, complex show and meet our tight deadlines without it. We don't have the budget of a huge network show, so these kinds of time savings are really valuable."

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Raw, real-world drama

Four teams of three editors handle the editing work on the 1-hour episodes, with one team assigned to one episode at a time. The editors are masters at mining the material for just the right takes to represent the truth of the events accurately while portraying the drama and nuance of the scenes. Through compression and juxtaposition, the editors not only show the best of the action scenes, but also those small reaction shots and intimate conversations that illuminate the characters and propel the story forward.

"The challenges are that you have complexity—both story-wise and footage-wise—of an action movie. But there is no script. There are true action scenes that happen on this show, and none of it is planned. Capturing it all and conveying it to people is a huge challenge," Ritchie says.

One of the ways the show portrays the raw, real-world setting is with sound, whether it is through the energized rock 'n' roll soundtrack or the beauty and eeriness of the natural sounds. "The sounds of the ship's engine, the sounds of the boat crashing through the ice—these are voices in the story. They help to build tension and anxiety," Foley says.

Those sounds can also get in the way when they overpower the onboard dialogue. Editor David Maurer often uses ScriptSync to clean up dialogue that is compromised by a rogue wave that crashes against the ship or an iceberg that scrapes against the hull and makes a racket. He uses ScriptSync to quickly find other takes where the character uses the same word or phrase and plugs in the cleaner dialogue.

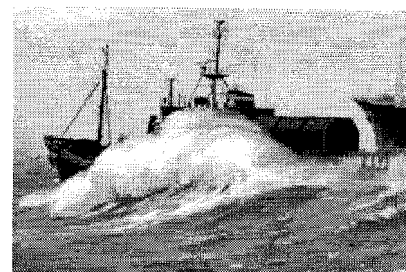
"We are always fighting the elements. If we didn't have ScriptSync, we might not have the time we need to make everything sound so good," Maurer says. "We really have a better-quality show because of ScriptSync."

Pirates of the sea

A total digital workflow helps give the post team the flexibility they need to handle whatever happens on the high seas. Final audio post is handled on **Avid Pro Tools** systems, while the online is done on an **Avid Media Composer Nitris DX** in Avid DNxHD 220 10-bit format.

Without today's technology, *Whale Wars*—which received Emmy Award nominations for cinematography and editing in 2010—may simply not be possible. Certainly not with the quality that is delivered episode after episode under tight deadlines. "It's interesting to watch the kind of shows being produced on TV now," Bronstein says. "The technology almost allows a different kind of creativity. I think for us, Avid is really the only choice. It allows us to cut and create faster and to create a different kind of TV show that can take advantage of all of this footage."

In the end, the real-life stakes on *Whale Wars* are upping the game both in front of and behind the camera. One more reason to stay tuned and see what storytelling feats the creative team will deliver next.



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