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Media International Programme Submissions

BY **KERRINE GOH**
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Interview With Aviva Silver: Insights Into 2008 And 2009 Media International Programme Submissions

The Preparatory Action MEDIA International is aimed at strengthening cooperation between the audiovisual industries of “third” countries and those of EU Member States. It also aims to encourage the two-way flow of cinematographic/audiovisual works. MEDIA International is in line with the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, the 2007 MEDIA programme and the provisions on cultural cooperation in economic partnership agreements and free trade agreements already in existence or under negotiation.

Since 2008 it makes it possible to encourage cooperation between European professionals and professionals of third countries following an approach aimed at maximising mutual benefit. Accordingly, it constitutes a vital starting point for the Commission in preparation for the future MEDIA Mundus programme for audiovisual cooperation between European professionals and professionals of third countries.

SEA Images talked to Aviva Silver, Head of the MEDIA Unit in the Directorate General “Information Society and Media” of the European Commission; she is responsible for the MEDIA programme, the MEDIA

International preparatory action and media literacy. Conversation took time and place during International Film Festival Rotterdam.

What exactly does "preparatory action" MEDIA International mean, as opposed to MEDIA Mundus project announced for years 2011, 2012 and 2013? How many preparatory actions can we expect before the launch of MEDIA Mundus?

Preparatory action is a special type of action that is carried out on the budget of the parliament. The parliament votes a certain amount of money and it asks the European Commission to implement the budget that is given, so it gave the Commission last year 2 million for Media International, and the Commission accepted the money and implemented it, as it happens, a 100%. Preparatory action can only last one year, or if the legal base is being worked on for a new program, three years. We therefore have already been working on a permanent legal bases, which is MEDIA Mundus, so provided the parliament chooses to, and there is no reason thinking the new parliament wouldn't continue this action, there would be a third call for proposals in 2010. There is already going to be another call for proposals in 2009, the work program for this action should was adopted and published on the 5th of February, so just before our information day at Berlinale. The five-language version of the call for proposals should be published soon afterward and the closing date will be 2nd of June. Hopefully also the 2010 call will have a budget of 5 million Euro like the 2009 action.

MEDIA International is the first MEDIA action open to applicants coming from all non-EU countries. Asia and Latin America have been especially emphasized as the new MEDIA territories, however the call is also open to countries from the Balkans, Africa, even Canada...

The Commission has especially emphasized that the action isn't open to only a specific language or geographical zones but to anyone and everyone. The novelty, the new and innovative idea that is behind MEDIA International is that all projects require a European and non-European partner to work together. But the truth of the matter is that certain groups of professionals will find it easier to put together projects with European professionals. This, per se, means the countries that had already worked and have contacts with Europe, such as certain Asian or Latin American countries. That being said, there are other programs of the European Commission that are aimed at specific regions in terms of development of the industry, like for example ACP program which is aimed only at group of African, Caribbean and Pacific States; they are there because there are different issues to be addressed in these regions as well. But if you look at one of 2008 MEDIA International projects, Europa Cinemas networks project, you can see that there are more than just Asia and Latin America covered – so it's a worldwide program.

Can you share some feedback on the results of the first round of the preparatory action?

We were heavily oversubscribed for training. We've received nearly double the number the projects we were able to give awards to, and in terms of those projects that got awards they did not all get the amount of the money they asked for, simply because we didn't have enough money, which we hope to improve this year. But in the top-level figures there were 11 projects for training, 6 projects for promotion/distribution and 1 project for cinema network. The training projects cover both extensions of projects from MEDIA 2007 – because we offered the possibility for projects that were already supported inside MEDIA 2007 to extend outside EU – and new ones: 9 of them are new projects, not always with new coordinators but new projects, which take completely new partners for MEDIA, like India, China, and Eastern European countries. We have one very interesting project called Train East, with a Romanian

coordinator, that's looking at the Caucasus in terms of trainers, producers. And the projects on training range very much, from training on copy rights, co-production, to more script training and looking for co-producers.

Can you explain more in details the specifics of projects that received support under "promotion and distribution support" programme, those seem to be the most elusive to imagine in practice (based on the first results of MEDIA International 2008)?

We wanted to try both promotion and distribution but we didn't have enough money so we left it very open. We also didn't know what kind of projects we would receive. And we didn't receive a lot of projects; people were asking us what we want. We said – we want to know how it would be best for you to work together to promote and distribute. We've had many meetings with sales agents, film promoters such as UniFrance, Holland Film Promotion, European Film Promotion, all sorts of bodies, and that's why this year we have much more direction in terms of what we want the projects to do. This year there are going to be two different strands and I hope this will help to improve the comprehension of what we'll be looking for.

Does MEDIA Mundus include the idea to fund co-productions following or upgrading the success of certain international film funding bodies like Hubert Bals, Fonds Sud ...?

As such – no. What we're trying to do, in terms of facilitating co-productions is to look at certain events, like pitch points and co-production markets, but we will not directly support coproduction. One

has to remember, and this is an important point to stress, that at the moment we have a proposal for a program. In the way in which the European Community legislates, the Commission has the right of initiative, which means the Commission proposed something but after that the legislators are the Council and the parliament. So we haven't included any direct funding for co-productions but the council and the parliament could change this. However, given the funding available, it would be important to prioritize which actions we would finance since the budget of the program is smaller, because, of course, of the financial crisis and the circumstances that have evolved since we started working on this proposal.

In the public consultations that we had before the proposal was made (there were whole series of external consultations, both using a consultant who wrote an ex ante evaluation, also through a written consultation run by the Commission, and the public hearing held in Brussels) the producers argued very strongly for having additional money for co-productions. But a number of funding bodies there were also questioned by the consultants, such as Hubert Bals, Fonds Sud, World Cinema Fund; a number of these funds said it would really be very interesting if they could only have their budgets increased by a certain amount, and that this would, perhaps, have been a good way for the Commission, which can never run a fund, to have had created the same impact, which would have been through these existing funds, that could have had responded through these calls for proposal. Now, this is not at present included in the proposal. Even if that was something that there was a lot of agreement on, partly because the member-states themselves do not think it's necessary, or appropriate, they feel, in the line with the principle of subsidiarity. It is on the member-states to decide on production funding, and that, therefore, the Community funding should concentrate on other activities. Also from our point of view, it was a simple question of the actions that were shown in the evaluation, and in the consultation, to have the most of impact on international co-operation. And our proposal prioritizes those activities that will have the biggest impact on the sector, which explains our five action lines.

So no need to ask in what way does MEDIA Mundus program differ from other international funds aimed to support non-European cinema?

No need, because this year we've allied them. In the first year we tried some different things out. But as soon as we closed the call for proposals last year we could already see which would be the best activities. And then the public consultation was also extremely helpful, we've had bilateral discussions with the German funds, we've had meetings in Paris, conference that was run by the CNC in July as a part of the French presidency, and in Cannes festival we spoke at a number of potential projects that didn't apply, and all of this intense activity in the second half of last year led us to make a proposal that changed MEDIA International and the new preparatory action for this year is already as precursor to MEDIA Mundus in 2011.

What were the most common problems that the people who were applying bumped into, most common complaints?

I think it's partly the administration. But in a funny ways because you're dealing with foreign partners and sometimes getting the information that we can get quite simply in Europe is more complicated in other countries. But the projects needed to be put together very quickly, one of the overriding problems last year was that we published the call for proposal in the end of April and we closed it 7th of June. But this year we will publish the call on 5th of February and closed the call on 2nd of June so it will be much, much longer, and in addition we will be present at a number of different events starting with Berlin, where the whole MI team will be present to meet with projects, talk to them about how the program will work, and what are the key criteria that will decide whether a project is selected or not.

Besides Berlinale, which events you plan to visit in order to meet your potential partners?

We're going to do an information day in Hungary, and Slovakia has asked to join in as well, there will be a presence of the team at Udine Far East, the Guadalajara FF, maybe Sao Paolo FF, Europa Cinemas, one of our current projects for MEDIA International, will be doing a tour of Latin America looking for new cinemas to join the group ...

And in Asia?

Probably Pusan...

But that's so far away, all the way in autumn ...

Holland Film representative will be going for Tokyo, so that's an opportunity, we were also meeting with people from Osaka FF in Berlin, also to talk about possible Asian connection, we invited both the Koreans and Japanese in Cannes last year. Someone from my team went to Abu Dhabi festival, to Sarajevo, so we have been trying to cover, as far as possible, a number of different regions. We cannot be everywhere because it would cost too much money. We've been trying to multiply the possibilities to meet people within the big events like Rotterdam and Berlin; to meet as many people as possible.

There is going to be a lot of publicity, I'm hoping we won't receive hundreds of applications because it will make the money too small again, and it will mean the administration is very heavy for my team, which is not very large. But I think what's important to me, and what makes me convinced that we're doing the right thing, is how much enthusiasm I meet for the projects. People keep telling me this is a really important thing that you're doing, and that's why I think even with the limited funds we have available it is really important to choose the good projects, because once good projects are up and running, they can carry on on their own afterwards, and that this could be creating the necessary synergies between Europe and independent cinemas around the world: the cinemas of Latin America but also the Mediterranean and cinemas of Eastern Europe. We've been invited to Istanbul, if I can find someone to go, we'll go there as well, but it is important that we also need to be in Brussels to negotiate the program.

Have you witnessed many problems deriving from structural weaknesses of film communities in "third" countries?

You have to remember what we've chosen to do and it's partly because it's a preparatory action. A preparatory action is or could be considered to be risky in that it doesn't have a legal basis that's been adopted just for it, it's an action in the framework of the budget of the European Community, whereas MEDIA 2007 is based on a legal decision it's subject to scrutiny, a program that's much more sound in terms of management. So what we chose to do is to say the coordinator must be responsible, and the coordinator must be European. Because it's a way for us to reduce the risk. Now, we had thought at first stage that maybe when we move to MEDIA Mundus we would change that approach, and have anyone as a coordinator, but at the end of the day we had decided that the system works extremely well with the European coordinator, and since in any event there has to be a European and non-Europeans [involved] it makes

sense from a financial risk point-of-view for us to keep the European coordinator.

Are you thinking of setting up permanent information points in the new regions you cover – something similar like MEDIA Desk offices in Europe?

No, but we're planning on using the delegations of the European Commission or the projects themselves to act as ambassadors. We wouldn't have a sufficient budget in any event with the money we have now, but there is a large demand from the delegations of the Commission within these foreign countries to be associated and we plan on providing them with the information and we are also carrying out a number of studies on these different areas: Latin America, Asia, Mediterranean; to establish a better idea of the structure of the industry so that we can keep improving the guideline simulation of what the industry is facing in these different countries, and the MEDIA Desks themselves will be used as contact points for people searching for partners for these activities, and they are all very enthusiastic about being part of the information network.

by Nika Bohinc

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