

By Frederick Blichert

It's been the big buzzword for a few years now, but as more networks engage in what's been called the "content arms race," the definition of what makes programming "premium" is evolving. Here, producers and network execs expound on what premium is (prestige content) and what it might not always need to be (pricey).

PATHWAYS TO PREMIUM

Netflix's *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* didn't need flash and fanfare to pull in viewers.



MOVERS/SHAKERS/BUYERS/MAKERS

Shopify Studios spotlight

14

THE CLOSE-UP

Q&A with Fred Burcksen, ZDFE

15

POINTED ARROW

John Smithson on the next wave of UGC

16

The arrival of Netflix's *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* earlier this year, and its subsequent success, has been an eye-opener for viewers and for industry execs alike. Here was a home improvement show in which the host, Kondo, encouraged participants to look inward as they considered their belongings, and to ask themselves if the stuff they'd accumulated in their homes "sparked joy." She didn't replace those belongings, or provide lavish home renovations to store what was left. Instead she offered helpful tips and left participants to do the work of improving their lives through the art of "decluttering."

It was a rather radical concept in its simplicity. Perhaps befitting the show's premise and its host, *Tidying Up* didn't come cluttered up with major production flourishes, yet it was undeniably a massive cultural event. Whether you're a Kondo acolyte or not, *Tidying Up* is textbook watercooler viewing and has tapped into the zeitgeist. It can be safely considered to be, for its broadcaster, prestige programming.

But it also challenges the industry definition of those terms. In an increasingly crowded unscripted space, with traditional broadcasters and cable nets competing with SVOD services to keep their slice of the pie, it's easy for all the players in the game to throw terms such as "premium" around to curry favor with networks, distributors and viewers.

Everyone wants the next *Wild Wild Country*, *Planet Earth* or *The Jinx*. But what ties such titles together? What really makes them premium unscripted series?

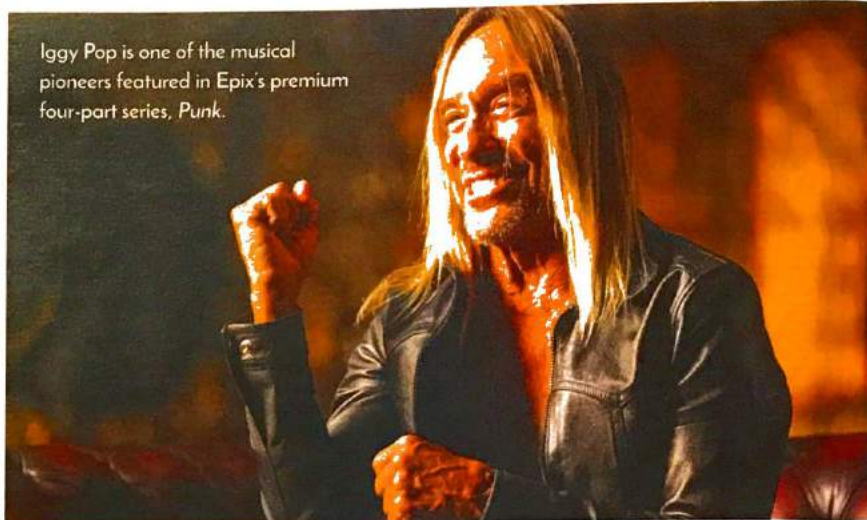
Hend Baghdady, executive producer of *Tidying Up* and SVP of production and alternative programming at The Jackal Group, doesn't think an enormous budget is necessary for an unscripted program to qualify as premium, though she acknowledges that money helps. Rather, the "premium" label reflects something unique, or something new.

"When you look at some of the docs that Nat Geo is doing, or *Cosmos*, obviously those are very clearly premium. They're very expensive shows," she tells *Realscreen*.

But *Tidying Up* went premium in different ways. "We made very deliberate decisions from the beginning to elevate the series," she adds. "It wasn't about bringing in the most expensive cameras." Instead, the producers worked to hone in on its inherently unique elements, even as it followed certain format conventions.

"There are a lot of Japanese elements in the show. Some more obvious than others," she says. "In Japan, and especially in Japanese anime and a lot of their cultural storytelling, the space itself plays as a character, and so we decided very early on that because this is a show about your space, and your relationship with the space and how that affects your spiritual well-being, we were going to treat the space as a character. You'll notice, if you watch the show, that a lot of it plays in these very long wides. It's not a 'cutty' show. That is something that costs us nothing."

Of course, the show also tapped into a national – and international – movement towards minimalism. Beyond a sense of originality, what can contribute to a program's premium



Iggy Pop is one of the musical pioneers featured in Epix's premium four-part series, *Punk*.

status? Other execs point not only to the importance of relevance, but specifically to the sense of event viewing.

"I think the 'eventized' nature of programming is what drives eyeballs," says Rachel Brill, head of unscripted programming at premium cable network Epix. That means formats don't generally fit the premium bill, since they function on the premise of reproducibility. "To do premium, you're likely not doing high volume, and you're carefully curating every single project, because there's a passionate audience that is well defined," she adds.

While Baghdady sees plenty of room to do that on a budget, Brill argues that premium content comes with a premium price tag. "You need to pay for the level of quality that premium is predicated on, in terms of Epix's expectations. And our expectations are that our unscripted or non-fiction narratives are going to sit well with our scripted dramas."

Talos Films co-president and co-founder Julian Hobbs agrees that premium content is both expensive and designed as an event. "You tend to pay more for premium events," he says. "That's not always true, but generally you pay more. It's at a price point that the network almost can't afford to have appear every week."

It's tricky to pin down, but the belief that premium projects are "can't miss" recurs. "Putting any constraints around 'premium' may be a mistake, but I do think it has one defining trait, which is that... it's a limited-run series. It's an event. Whether it's a one-night event, or a three-week event, you feel like you must watch it, and that it's only going to be there for a limited time," says Hobbs, a former programming exec at History.

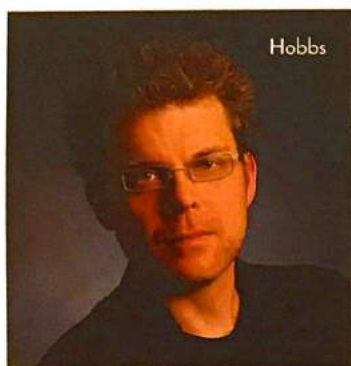
And while the added expense can be aimed at higher production value, it can also be leveraged to promote a premium product, especially if that's a short-term push for something that won't be coming back season after season. "You can maximize your ad revenue. You can maximize your PR push. You can maximize your press push," says Hobbs.

All of this should foster brand engagement, he adds: "If it's done right, it's hugely brand-enhancing." Hobbs' focus on brand also opens up the definition of "premium" to networks and projects that might not be immediately considered as such. "I've coined this term, 'populist premium,'" he says. "You

SHOPIFY STUDIOS

can have a big, noisy event that's on brand, that's informational and entertaining, and... award winning. All of that can come together if people want to lean into their core brand."

If that doesn't offer a clear-cut definition or help you come up with the next buzz-worthy unscripted event, that's probably because there is no premium silver bullet. There's no one-size-fits-all model. A relatively inexpensive project such as *Tidying Up* or Lifetime's *Surviving R. Kelly* might spark collective joy — or long overdue discussions with



Hobbs

“

Whether it's a one-night event, or a three-week event, you feel like you must watch it, and it's only going to be there for a limited time.”

deep cultural resonance. Either can have profound impact for broadcasters.

Then again, an expensive, brand-affirming project such as BBC's upcoming, and sure to be lavish, natural history docuseries *One Planet: Seven Worlds* is a near certain home run. It appears that, when playing in the premium sandbox, there's plenty of wiggle room.



And Nowhere Else is a series of documentary shorts from Shopify Studios.

Here, Realscreen shines a spotlight on emerging buyers and creators in the unscripted and non-fiction entertainment space. By Frederick Blichert

Headquarters:
Toronto, Canada

Parent company:
Shopify

In its own words:
“Shopify Studios will leverage strategic partnerships with internationally known creators and production partners to develop, produce, and finance an array of projects spotlighting entrepreneurship — from long-form series to feature documentaries and more — for streaming platforms and traditional networks.”

Canadian e-commerce giant Shopify made a bold move into media production with the announcement of Shopify Studios last January — a full-service production house based in Toronto.

With an in-house team of about 35, Shopify Studios is wholly producing some content internally for its own channels on YouTube and Facebook, but is keen to embrace copro possibilities for bigger projects. “For the longer form, whether it's documentary or even scripted, we wouldn't do that in-house. That would be with partners,” Jason Badal, head of Shopify Studios, tells *Realscreen*.

The company has already partnered with other prodcos including Anonymous Content, Wheelhouse Entertainment's Spoke Studios and Saville Productions, with project announcements to come.

While entrepreneurship is at the core of the stories Shopify Studios is telling, Badal stresses that there's no standard way to be an entrepreneur, and the company's mandate is not to sanitize the concept or just to boost brands. Entrepreneurs come in all shapes and sizes, and that is what Shopify Studios wants to highlight.

“We don't want to make entrepreneurship seem easier

than it is, or gloss over the facts. We think that it has an impact on communities. We think that the details matter,” Badal says. “Those are our most important principles.”

What that means in practice is that viewers won't see winner-take-all game shows that fast-track success. Instead, series and films will look at real stories of entrepreneurs — be they retailers, distributors or craftspeople — making it work on their own terms.

Shopify Studios is open to various approaches and formats that fit this mentality, and creators looking to pitch projects can find contact information and guidelines at ShopifyStudios.com.

The studio also comes with a huge roster of high profile contacts in the worlds of entrepreneurship and business, including Kylie Jenner, Kanye West, Kim Kardashian, Drake, Nestlé and Allbirds, who all use Shopify's e-commerce technology.

“It's an unfair advantage we have over the traditional media space, in that we have so many merchants on our platform, and we think that allows us to see which merchants have really interesting stories,” says Badal. “We interact with them all the time, and we have insight into what they're doing.”

Frederick Blichert