

How A+E Networks Africa is building on its local content strategy

By  Juanita Pienaar

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A+E Networks Africa had a content showcase in Johannesburg, last week. And we spoke to managing director for the EMEA territories, Dean Possenniskie, who is responsible for overseeing and growing A+E Networks' channel, content distribution and digital media businesses across the UK, Europe, Middle East and Africa.



Managing director for the A+E Networks Africa's EMEA territories, Dean Possenniskie. Image supplied.

Here he shares more about what we can expect from the channel, specifically focusing on local content for South African audiences, how growth in mobile/online penetration in the country is affecting the channel's strategies and how it intends to build on A+E Network's local content commissioning strategy.

■ ***Can you tell us what top imperatives A+E Networks is focusing on – specifically in South Africa and the rest of the region?***

Firstly, I think it's important to know the shareholders of A+E. It's the Hearst Corporation, which is one of the biggest private companies in America. They own everything from magazines to newspapers, to television, finance, real estate and technology. And the other shareholder is Sky, which is the largest pay-tv operator across Europe.

Whatever we do in Africa is backed by these two big multi-national companies – and, I feel, leading the company across EMEA, there is a greater emphasis and focus on Africa, than in pretty much any other part of the Europe, Middle East Africa region. Hearst and Sky and myself are very positive about how we can continue to grow one of the very exciting and high-potential regions.

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We have come quite a long way in the last five years – in terms of the team that we now have on the ground –the local team is very much empowered and expanding greatly. This has made it perfect to invest here.

The last five years alone we have invested more than R50m into local content productions and that is just going to continue to grow. I think that is a real imperative to us, the fact that we established a lot of strong partnerships, we have good experience now. We can continue to build more on what we can do locally – in terms of creation of local programming.

Another imperative is how we continue to look at new opportunities. We're very committed to our partnership with DStv. We're very innovative in what we do with them – like the pop-up channels in the last year, *History of Football*, *100 Years of War* and with the digital product like *History Vault*.

I think there are many interesting ways in which we can grow our profile and our brands here.

■ ***Significant growth in mobile/online penetration across the country is also transforming the way people in South Africa/Africa watch TV – with many reaching for their phone when looking to engage in TV content. How has this (if at all) influenced your strategies and plans for these consumers?***

When we think about mobile, we think more about short-form content. Anything from 30 seconds to six or seven minutes. We absolutely see – in Africa – a high penetration of mobile usage. We certainly think about that when we build new, local productions – short-form content that can work to promote what we're doing as well as showing our brand in that short-form manner in a really creative way.



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We've built a dedicated short-form production company called 45th & Dean, in the US, – and we've taken up quite a bit of learnings from what we've done in America. We are very focused on what we might have to do here, in the future, around the creation of short-form. It may not even be linked to anything we're producing – it might be that we're working with partners, whether they be mobile partners or advertising partners, to create content for them. Or we can create stories that we think are relevant across our brand in a short-form manner.

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[Had some fun working on this video for Studio Company with A&E. A nice piece to remember my past two years with Studio Company. See if you can find me💎💎.💎💎: 45th & Dean #abtstudiocompany #abtapprentice #americanballettheatre #worldwideballet #balletworld #dancers #ballet #maledancer #pointeshoes #dreams #ethanstiefel #metropolitanoperahouse #lincolncenter #pasdedeux #workhard #aande #45thanddean](#)

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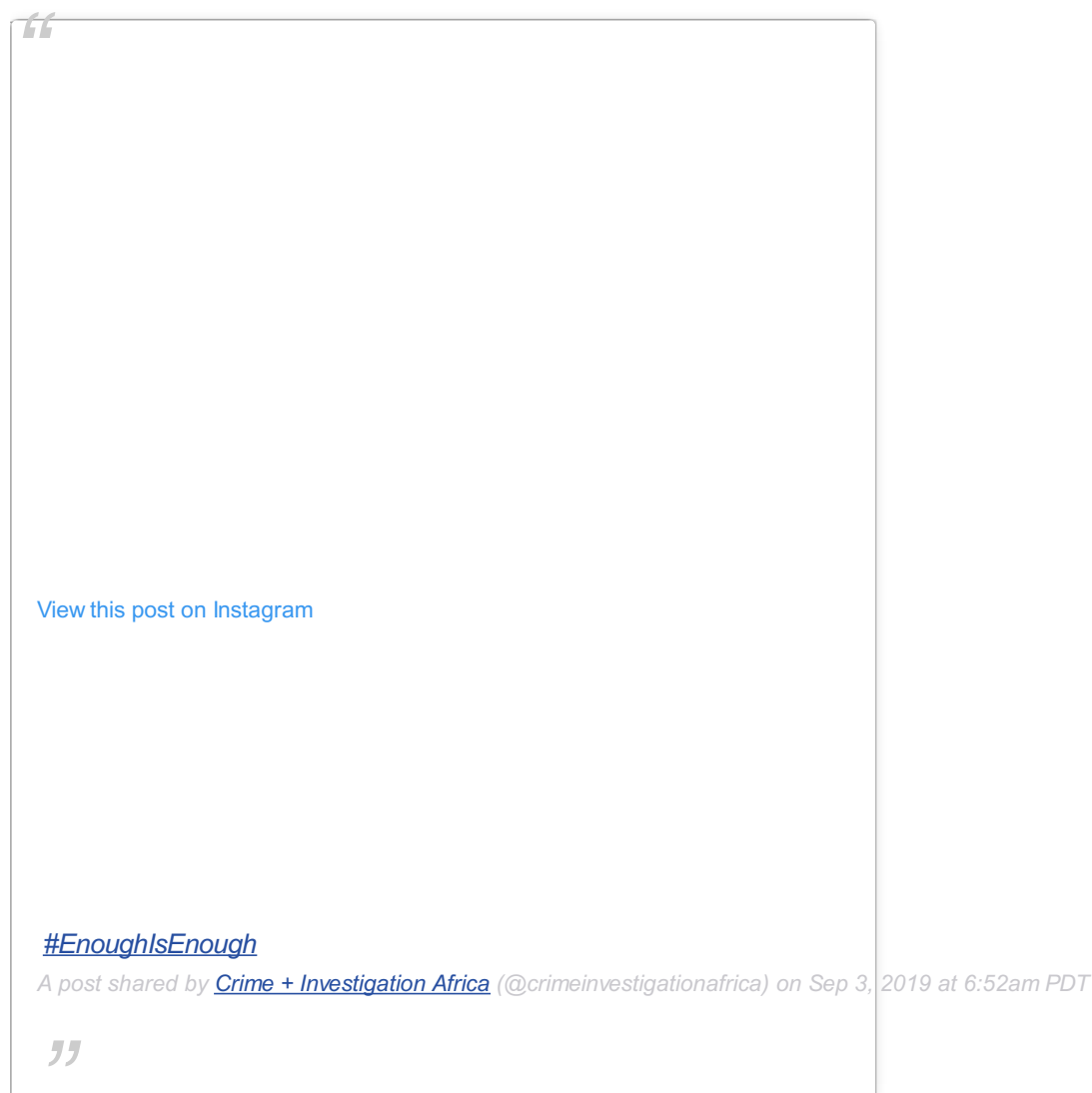
th mobile providers. To be honest, we've hired people with entrepreneurial backgrounds and a very good range of experience when it comes to working with mobile operators.

- **Over the last few years, the channel has been on a journey to build on its local content commissioning strategy, following the success of local versions of international shows *Pawn Stars SA*, *Four Weddings SA* and *Married at First Sight SA*. Will this journey continue?**

The journey started in 2013 with *Miracle Rising* and the premiere of that incredible piece of programming in Johannesburg, here in South Africa. It was a piece of programming that went across our networks, right across the world.

From there, I think it just gave us confidence thinking about local programming. I also think your first steps can sometimes be the right steps – taking international formats and that is essentially what we've focused on the last several years with *Pawn Stars* and *Four Weddings*.

I think now, with the experience and the partnerships that we have, we're looking much more closely at causes or potential stories that will resonate locally –these stories are not necessarily formatted internationally but are very relevant and will also resonate globally.



And that is not something that is new to us. We've created campaigns here, actively here for the last few years.

We'll be doing something across the whole region that will give us more scale and resource. But you'll see new programming on Crime & Investigation around that, and it's very local now.

I think that is the right place for us now, to focus on the next stage of our journey when it comes to local production.

“ One of the things about television is that the writing matters. That is the bread and butter of our business. But beyond that, our brand has an opportunity to make a real impact and a difference. And that is what we're focusing on what we're doing around Crime & Investigation. ”

It's about what we can do locally that really connects our audiences in a way that is I think important to them and it can be positive to them.

■ **What new content can South African audiences expect from A+E Networks?**

There is some great content coming. Recently on History, we showcased *Spy Wars* – and that's produced by Damian Lewis, who is very well known for his role in *Homeland*. It's an eight-piece series. I was fortunate enough to be at the international launch of the show, and what I found was that Damian Lewis is well-known and received as an actor and so much more.

In his role as well as host of *Spy Wars*, he's been right in the thick of researching these factual stories of global espionage, engaging with the producers of the show and reaching out to the KGB, MI6, CIA and having them talk and open up on camera.

The stories that you're going to see dates back to the Cold War and are fascinating. And what makes it so relevant is that these things are happening now – Salisbury in the UK, for example. It's a really fascinating look at the last 50 years, and the impact these activities have had on the world.

Crime & Investigation, we globally had a big hit [with *Surviving R Kelly*] and again this is really giving a voice to people that have been impacted. Through it, we allow people who have been hurt by R Kelly and that whole unfortunate episode to speak up. That was a huge success in terms of what we can do on the channel but also in terms of viewership.

On Lifetime, we are excited about *Don't Tell the Bride* here locally. It's a great format and a fun format. And something I think that would be fantastic to produce here as well.

■ **What excites you most about A+E Networks and where it's going?**

It's taken about five years to build a great team, and to put this team together. And that team now has to create and find opportunities that otherwise we wouldn't. Now we are – sort of – at a tipping point, where we have invested a lot into production and the training this year. We have invested about R30m into the media industry in South Africa. I think what excited me, is building on that. Doing more and investing more.

As I have said, this region is a priority for myself and our shareholders. Would it be more local content, the creation of more jobs, would it be interesting things in digital, would we bring our experience of what's happening in Europe, would it be creating new and interesting partnerships for DStv – that excites me. We have a really strong team on the ground that can make these things happen, and make things that I certainly wouldn't be able to think of.

That is the exciting part and where you can really see the potential. And the fact that we are really dedicated to continuing investing here.

For the latest news and updates, visit the [History Channel website](#), [Lifetime Channel website](#) and [Crime & Investigation website](#).

ABOUT JUANITA PIENAAR

Juanita is the editor of the marketing & media portal on the Bizcommunity website. She is also a contributing writer.

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