

## C21's Factual Week: Distributor profile

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### Joined up thinking

Tim Sparke, MD of UK distributor MercuryMedia, is busy at the Sheffield International Documentary Festival this week getting the word out about [JoiningTheDots.TV](#), his forthcoming broadband partnership with [Aggregator.TV](#).

Billing itself as a site "for documentary lovers by documentary professionals," [JoiningTheDots.TV](#) is a 50/50 joint venture between Mercury and Aggregator TV, the IPTV company set up by former BSkyB commercial director Martin Goswami. It will launch in February 2007 with the aim of bypassing the "gatekeepers of television" to deliver a range of docs via broadband, IPTV, mobile and in-flight offerings.



"The idea came from (9/11 doc) *Loose Change* (left). I offered it to broadcasters in February and no one wanted it, so we put it on the internet. Thirty million downloads later and loads of broadcasters bought it," says Sparke. "We realised that there is massive demand for programming that is slightly out of the box. You get real-time data as to who liked it or didn't, and that is really useful when trying to sell something."

In addition to being an alternative to the traditional television route, the service will also provide a platform for dialogue amongst those interested in the genre. "It is a club. The beauty of it is that after every film there is a forum and people can write to each other, slag off the director, whatever," explains Sparke. "It is totally community-based. These are independent films for independent people. If you trust corporate media and you trust the government, then this site is not for you."

At launch, Sparke (below) is hoping for a minimum of 200 titles from a range of producers - with whom he is currently in discussions - and the plan is to add anywhere from 10 to 20 fresh titles monthly. [JoiningTheDots.TV](#) will license content on either an exclusive or non-exclusive basis, and as the service grows it will create a DVD distribution arm and license TV rights in a bid to increase producer revenues.



Producers will be paid quarterly and receive 20% of revenues for non-exclusive titles and 30% for exclusive rights. What remains is shared between the two founding partners to pay back their investment in the venture. Mercury is responsible for providing all the content, while Aggregator is supplying the technical expertise and building the actual site. Marketing costs are split between the two.

Initially, the site will operate as a members-only model, with subscriptions costing £25 (US\$48) per month. The goal, says Sparke, is to attract 10,000 subs in the first year, at which point he expects to be at break-even point.

"There are millions of potential subscribers out there and eventually we want our subscribers investing in docs, because we think there are an awful lot of people who would like to put £500 into something and be a filmmaker," he explains, adding that this is a way of democratising things.

"It is a way for little people to have some involvement in this big world in which they have no

influence and a sense that a whole bunch of them can get together and make a difference."

And this concept of banding together to create more clout also works on the production side: "Producers are all competitors and every producer secretly hates every other producer. What I am saying is let's all form a big union and we can all be on the one side. Someone may come in to watch a programme on crystal meth but also watch something on IVF - and you all do well out of it, we are all kind of on the same side."

Mercury is seeking docs that cover anything from current affairs and history to arts and science and will range in quality from blue-chip docs to projects with lower production values. But, says Sparke: "It is not going to be your YouTube-type stuff; it will be about three or four levels up from that."