

A world in 50 years

April 15, 2013 by [Lindsay Gibb](#)



(Pictured: *Invisible Universe*, produced by ZDFE's joint venture doc.station, uses state-of-the-art, super-slow motion cameras to show the science behind events that can happen in the blink of an eye)

As German pubcaster ZDF celebrates its 50th anniversary and its commercial arm, ZDFE, its 20th, *realscreen* speaks to key members of their factual and documentary teams to discuss the importance of documentary, factual programming, and coproduction to the companies – then, now, and going forward.

German public broadcaster ZDF is reaching a major milestone this year – its 50th anniversary.

The Mainz-headquartered company, which now boasts three thematic channels — ZDFneo, ZDFinfo and ZDFkultur — as well as its flagship channel and the jointly operated Phoenix, KI.KA, 3sat and ARTE networks, has dedicated its airwaves to informative and innovative documentary programming right from the start, and still airs the most programming on social, political, arts and cultural subject matter in Germany.

On ZDF alone, seven hours per week are devoted to documentary. ZDFinfo and ZDFkultur, which were first launched in 1997, both carry factual programming, with ZDFinfo focusing on news and current history and ZDFkultur focusing on youth and pop culture.

ZDF's commercial arm, ZDF Enterprises (ZDFE), is also hitting a milestone this year. ZDFE, which in January announced a restructuring into four divisions for each genre of programming

the company oversees, has been facilitating international coproductions and distributing content for the past 20 years.

With partners on every continent, one genre that ZDF is perhaps best known for is its contemporary history programming. A+E Networks has been partnering with ZDF for more than a decade. Sean Cohan, EVP of international, points to 2009's copro with ZDF, *The Rise and Fall of the Berlin Wall*, as one of the most successful international collaborations A+E has ever undertaken.

And while History in the U.S. has made factual entertainment and reality more of a focus as of late, Cohan says: "I think we do still share the same appreciation for quality and strong relatable, distributable, universal history programming. There's a shared DNA."

Of course, a major part of any company's success and evolution stems from its people. ZDF currently employs 3,600 permanent staff and works with almost an equal number of freelancers.

Its ability to partner with various channels and producers globally is a testament to the channel group's longevity. "Frankly, they enjoy partnerships with some of our competitors," says Cohan. "We all coexist because they're good at what they do. They're good people to do business with, they're easier people to do business with than others, and they take the long view."

As ZDF's head of culture and science Peter Arens notes, documentary programming has been at the heart of ZDF's mandate from its beginnings in 1963. But it has evolved to encompass what he calls the "super-doc" – higher-budget productions that incorporate CGI and a drama-like look and feel, yet still feature the latest scientific findings and viewpoints of experts.

Going forward, head of ZDFE.factual Ralf Rückauer sees opportunities for such "super-docs" in the increasingly on-demand world of television, as well as a demand for a wider range of content for an ever-increasing array of channels.

But ultimately, he sees audiences for ZDF and beyond continuing to want a window into their world that only documentary can provide. "If possible, we want our cameras to be right there, on site, witnessing a discovery, giving the viewer the feeling of being part of history in the making."

Peter Arens, head of culture and science at ZDF



How important is documentary to ZDF's programming profile today and how has the role of documentary evolved in ZDF's schedule over the years?

Documentaries have always been an important component of ZDF's programming. As a public broadcaster, ZDF devotes approximately 50% of its program time to information; a considerable part consists of documentaries.

Thematic domains range from science to history, and from current affairs to entertainment formats such as docusoaps and factual entertainment.

ZDF has two documentary time slots at the heart of primetime, on Sunday at 7:30 p.m. and on Tuesday at 8:15 p.m. The strong presence of documentaries here sets us apart from the other German broadcasters.

The focus of these primetime programs lies in the fields of science, history, wildlife and society, whereby the 'Terra X' time slot on Sunday addresses a particularly youthful audience – the youngest for all of ZDF's information programs. These programs strive for an extremely modern visual idiom and are always particularly successful when they present major educational and knowledge themes.

In the past years we have successfully produced one or two "super-docs" with a higher budget and generally with international partners.

Such events have been responsible for drawing special attention to us from the press and the public, and have elevated the status of the documentary genre, which is reflected in matters of financing and reputation.

We are interested in continuing to increase the importance of historical and scientific documentaries and, alongside the big TV movies, turning scripted drama into a highlight in ZDF's programming.

What are some of the pivotal moments for doc programming in the history of ZDF?

The decisive spark occurred in 1982 with the establishment of 'Terra X' as a weekly primetime slot for documentaries at 7:30 p.m. on Sundays. Since then we have been airing our major educational documentaries in this slot every Sunday. In 1994 we screened *Quo Vadis – Major Turning Points in World History*, our first program to feature historical re-enactments (the battle of Crécy in 1346).

More elaborate CGI was first used in 2002 in *Storm over Europe – The German Migration* in order to compellingly illustrate mass migrations. And with *Update – The World in 50 Years* and *Armageddon*, in 2007 and 2008, we made strong international coproductions which were also very successful in the United States, produced with Discovery U.S.

How have newer factual genres such as docusoaps and docudrama been integrated into ZDF's schedules?

The documentary continues to evolve, and its traditional narrative mode and formal idiom must never come to a standstill. Here the factual genre is always in motion. Especially in the field of factual entertainment, which is very strongly stamped by Germany's commercial broadcasters, we had to find new, original directions as pubcasters.

We take our protagonists seriously and emphasize the social relevance of the topics. While authenticity is writ large at ZDF, in our programming you will not find scripted reality in the current form that is popular today.

In past years, the entertainment variants of the documentary, such as docusoaps and factual entertainment, were predominantly shown in ZDF's daytime programs, while the more important, elaborate documentaries and docudramas were aired in primetime.

Are German audiences receptive to more "American-style" reality shows and formats?

If, by "American-style" you're referring to entertainment value, then I agree. The magical word "edutainment" was very well received here at ZDF when I started to cooperate with the Discovery Channel in 1998. A science documentary must also entertain, in addition to being understandable; this is a basic requirement.

Americans and Brits especially are masters of this domain: educational programs that are not entertaining are not acceptable, in my opinion.

If we look at the factual entertainment formats that are currently popular in the U.S. now, and which feature big machines and larger-than-life heroes that address a chiefly male audience, I must say that these are [more likely] to be found on specialized channels, not on a nationwide [programmer] such as ZDF.

If we turn away from the great educational topics in favor of spectacular heroic stories, this will not be accepted by our viewers, since we have no tradition of cultivating such programs. Thus, we wish our partners Discovery, National Geographic, History Channel and others the

best of luck and hope that they will be offering us more sensational knowledge documentaries in the future as they did some years ago.

Ralf Rückauer, head of ZDFE.factual



What programs and documentary films have been the biggest sellers over the course of the division's 20-year history?

Looking back, we can't help but mention [journalist, producer and frequent ZDF contributor] Guido Knopp and his history series for ZDF such as *Hitler's Henchmen*, which has had enormous worldwide success. We are bringing one of his latest programs to MIPTV, *Last Secrets of the Third Reich*. And although he just retired, I can assure you that there will still be plenty of productions coming from "his" department in the near future.

Update – The World in 50 Years, Super Comet, Planet Egypt and Dawn of the Ocean have definitely been our biggest sellers over the years. Also very important to us is our collaboration with German filmmaker Werner Herzog [for] *On Death Row*.

Are there any genres or subject matter you're particularly interested in acquiring content for? Why do you believe they are the most popular for you?

You can always rely on the big stories – "life and death" and the issues that concern people all over the world. Why are we here? Is there a God? Why did the dinosaurs become extinct? Why do we go to war? What are the secrets of the ancient world? Can we survive the next big catastrophe?

It's all about knowledge. People are attracted to things they already know about, and want to know more about. So we have to give them something new, the latest findings, the newest perspectives.

What subject matter and genres tend to perform best in different territories?

There are global subjects, global issues and global genres like [our] ‘Nature Now!’ programming — the big issues and stories of life and death.

At the same time, we’re aware of specific demands in certain territories: local fact entertainment production in the U.S., presenter-led wildlife in the UK, science in Japan, knowledge in France, ancient history in Italy, and contemporary history in Germany.

How has the recent restructuring changed the way you work with factual programming and partners at ZDFE?

With experts working in genre units, each of whom is responsible for one genre – drama, junior, entertainment and factual – we feel that we can have a deeper understanding of the market and of our clients’ needs. We can now set up a new and different focus which better serves the genre in question.

As previous head of sales at ZDFE, I was covering all genres, but we felt that over the course of the last 20 years, the structure of our clients has shifted from all-rounders to specialists.

Most of them are interested in a single genre only, and it makes little sense to have a factual expert talking to Disney or Nickelodeon while a junior expert has coffee with A+E, Nat Geo or Discovery. In the end it will be very beneficial for our relationship with the clients, and I am more than sure that we can provide improved service.

Looking back over the 20 years of ZDFE, and particularly your 10 years with the company, what are some of your proudest moments?

Sometimes it is a single moment that makes you happy. A good sales result after a week in Cannes, the first moment you see a rough cut of a program you have worked on with different partners for years.

In an overall perspective, it is the notion that you can help your clients succeed by giving them something special and helping them develop their business – by being part of their world.

[We're proud] to help “partner number one,” ZDF, play a role on the international market. And by the same token, we are very proud to have long-time, deep and friendly relations with our partners. [Also] to have fun and do silly things like printing out an offer on pink paper because the client likes pink more than white – in the end he said yes to my proposal and it is one of the best win-win deals I ever did.