Celebrating factual’s ‘new golden era’

MIPDoc marks “the first celebratory coming out” of Off the Fence following its acquisition by ZDFE in January of this year. Off the Fence’s Ellen Windemuth and ZDFE’s Ralf Rueckauer spoke to Julian Newby ahead of their MIPDoc Showcase

IN JANUARY of this year ZDF Enterprises, the commercial arm of German state broadcaster ZDF, based in Mainz, acquired 100% of Amsterdam and London-based factual production and distribution company Off the Fence (OTF) and 50% of its SVOD business The WaterBear Network.

“What that means is that the two companies are working very closely together but we’re not merging operations or staff or catalogue,” OTF founder, owner and CEO Ellen Windemuth said. “We are simply enhancing one another’s market reach and we are collaborating in the places where we can maximise business for both parties.”

“That is very important because many people, especially production companies, ask us now if anything will change dramatically and we can say: ‘No, your partners at both companies will be the same as they used to be and the way of working with both companies is the same as before’,” vice-president, unscripted, ZDFE, Ralf Rueckauer said. “Both brands will still be around, but of course we will be looking for synergies in various ways and we will want to try and make things easier for our partners where possible.”

Specifically, Rueckauer said, OTF “has a very attractive production arm in Bristol which has a very good network with mostly North American and British channels and partners. That is very attractive for us to have a more direct link into the English-speaking world than we had as a simple distribution company.” He added: “The WaterBear element of the deal strengthens our presence in the SVOD market too.”

For Windemuth, ZDFE has “strong expertise in history which we value very highly, and for us at OTF, besides having complementary skills to ZDFE and a comparably well-respected brand, we like very much the proximity to the public broadcaster ZDF as well as its many channels, because we do a lot of business there.” She added: “It was quite a no-brainer to be honest. When it all happened we thought, ‘Why didn’t we think about this years ago?’”

Rueckauer said that while ZDFE has been “solid in the field of specialist factual” for over two decades, the market did become difficult for a while as big markets including the US and the UK “went more local. But what we feel now is there is a certain swing back and audiences are increasingly longing for these quality specialist factual programmes which inform you about things that you’ve always wanted to know, that are visually stunning and entertaining way without being dumbed-down,” he said: “And more and more players are appearing — for example CoastricityStream [John Hendrick’s non-fiction subscription VOD streaming service] who were in the news recently for investing more money into factual programming.”

“A lot of the platforms are coming back around to factual,” Windemuth said. “A lot of them moved away from it for a while. We never did and ZDFE never did. So I think that ZDFE and OTF are in for a very healthy period because we never changed our tune. Both companies have all the reason in the world to be optimistic — and companies like our distribution partner Smithsonian are producing a lot of factual programming and they are launching channels. So I believe this is a renewed golden era for factual programming.”

• The ZDFE/Off the Fence keynote and content showcase is on Sunday, April 7, at 15:30 in the Grand Theatre of the JW Marriott