Media Giant Sees Gain in TV Change

Opportunities abound in small-screen world of many digital and global partners
Story by ED MEZA

While the international media industry grapples with the tectonic shifts triggered by the growing proliferation of streaming services, ZDF Enterprises is riding the wave of change by seizing opportunities, creating new business models and forging partnerships with the likes of Netflix and other digital players. As the world sales, licensing and co-production arm of German broadcaster ZDF, ZDFE has long established itself as an independent player in both domestic and global markets and it is quickly adapting to the sector's new reality.

The company has also expanded its sales and production operations through key acquisitions as part of its overall growth strategy.

"We have tried to embrace the changes, the disruption that these platforms have brought to the market through digitization and streaming possibilities, to recognize the opportunities rather than the threat," ZDFE President and CEO Fred Burcksen tells Variety. "We have so far been able to profit from that."

The company has seen recent titles picked by the likes of Netflix, Hulu and Nickelodeon in streaming deals. ZDFE has also worked with Netflix to launch shows from programming packages sold to the streaming giant. At the production level, the companies are also working increasingly close, with Netflix having boarded fantasy children’s series “The Worst Witch” as a producer, joining CBBC, ZDF and ZDFE.

ZDFE’s production subsidiaries are likewise finding greater opportunities. Bavaria Fiction, a 49% ZDFE subsidiary, is producing “Freud,” a historical crime drama featuring Sigmund Freud, for Netflix and Austria’s ORF.

The company has long been an active international player in terms of its catalog and is doing its part to meet current demand for scripted content from around the globe.

ZDFE early on recognized the potential of Scandinavian properties, producing a Kurt Wallander movie series based on the works of Swedish author Henning Mankell; the long-running crime series “Beck,” based on the novels of Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö; and Sieg Larsson’s “Millennium” trilogy.

Peter Nadermann, a former producer at both ZDF and ZDFE, was instrumental in making Nordic noir a staple of the group’s programming portfolio. He recently returned to the company after ZDFE acquired a 49% stake in his Cologne-based production firm, Nadcon Film. The company was established in 2012 by Nadermann and German entertainment group Constantin Film. ZDFE took over Constantin’s stake in January, with Nadermann holding the remainder.

Nadermann “has a good nose for great content,” says Burcksen.

Nadcon has co-produced such series as

Global Outlook
ZDF Enterprises' international lineup includes "Hide and Seek" from Ukraine's Film UA Group.

With a muscular lineup of factual programming, recent acquisitions and expanded catalogs, ZDF Enterprises’ ZDFE unscripted division is expecting strong business this year. Consisting of two main arms, factual and entertainment, ZDFE unscripted covers a broad range of genres, from history, wildlife and science, to music, arts and sports.

“The division is very solid for us,” says ZDFE president and CEO Fred Burcksen, adding that its global success makes it a very profitable unit for the group.

ZDFE beefed up its non-scripted business in January with the acquisition of leading Dutch production and sales company Off the Fence (OTF), which just signed a global, multi-year distribution deal with Red Bull’s Terra Mater Factual Studios.

The company wanted to achieve two things with the acquisition of OTF, says Burcksen: strengthen its global sales power and bring OTF’s production operations into the ZDFE fold.

“It should remain an independent unit, but we are collaborating closely as partners and we are looking at how to better sell our common catalog,” he adds.

With OTF and Terra Mater’s lineups combined with its own catalog, ZDFE is expecting licensing revenue this year to reach some $30 million.

Burcksen says the group is looking “to strengthen and maintain” its production operations through acquisitions as part of its growth strategy.

In 2017 the company took a stake in London-based World Media Rights, which produces factual TV programming and drama reconstruction for a wide range of international broadcasters as well as U.S. cable franchises like “Myth Hunters.”

ZDFE’s factual programming lineup this year includes such titles as “The Greatest Race,” about the charioteers of ancient Rome; “Just Animals,” described as “a spectacular celebration of the world’s wildlife”; and “Humboldt: Epic Explorer,” which follows Alexander von Humboldt’s exploration of South America in 1799.

In time for the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 mission, ZDFE is also presenting three documentaries about humanity’s lunar ambitions, including “The Moon Landing and the Nazis,” which examines the role of German scientists in the U.S. space program.
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Fred Burcksen

Swedish crime drama “Spring Tide,” Danish-Swedish thriller “Greyzone” and Spain’s “The Invisible Guardian” as well as Lone Scherfig’s latest feature film, “The Kindness of Strangers,” which opened this year’s Berlin Film Festival.

Nadermann also served as a producer on the international crime drama “The Team,” from Network Movie, another key ZDFE subsidiary.

Network Movie partnered with Sweden’s Anagram in co-producing the upcoming Berlin-set spy series “West of Liberty” which ITV is selling internationally.

Burcksen notes that more original stories are emerging from non-traditional markets.

“We are looking very intensively at Spain, at Central Europe, especially Ukraine. It’s an exciting development for the sector.”

Indeed, ZDFE’s international lineup, which boasts shows from both sides of the pond, includes Ukrainian thriller “Hide and Seek” from Film.UA Group, the production company behind the widely sold hit series “The Sniffer.”

Central and Eastern Europe is in motion, Burcksen says. “There is momentum. I see good possibilities. The creativity is right, the implementation is right. These are prerequisites. Today’s market wants well-told original stories, regardless of where they come from. That brought us to ‘Hide and Seek.’”

ZDFE previously handled HBO Poland’s “The Border” and had a good experience with the series, Burcksen adds.

Among ZDFE’s other current titles are French-language Canadian crime thriller “Victor Lessard,” British detective drama “London Kills” and French family drama “Beyond Appearances.”

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JUNIOR UNIT GRABS YOUNG AUDIENCES

Animated series play well in the worldwide streaming market

Story by ED MEZA

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- Boasting animation, live-action shows and tween series, ZDF Enterprises’ ZDFE Junior division offers a diverse catalog of domestic and international productions.

  The unit is attracting strong global interest with such titles as “The Worst Witch,” “The Bureau of Magical Things” and “Find Me in Paris,” particularly on the VOD front, says ZDFE president and CEO Fred Burcksen.

  ZDFE’s recent kids’ titles have all attracted leading VOD partners.

  Nickelodeon was quick to pick up global linear and non-linear rights to Jonathan M. Shiff Prods.’ Australian teen fantasy series “The Bureau of Magical Things” Co-produced by ZDF and ZDFE, the show is already set for season two.

  Hulu nabbed U.S. streaming rights to Cottonwood Media’s tween drama “Find Me in Paris,” about a Russian ballerina in 1905 Paris who is flung into the future by a magical pendant and forced to adapt to modern technology, fashion and teen slang while still attending the city’s prestigious Opera Ballet School. ZDF and ZDFE likewise co-produced.

  Netflix similarly boarded “The Worst Witch” early on. Developed and produced by CBBC, ZDF and ZDFE, the show is based on Jill Murphy’s popular books centering on a young witch at Miss Cackle’s Academy for Witches. The series is now heading into its fourth season.

  “It’s a business model that works very well for us and we are profiting very strongly from the digital platforms,” Burcksen says.

  ZDFE aims to later sell the show’s second-window rights to other major clients, such as broadcasters like TVE in Spain and Mediaset in Italy.

  ZDFE Junior’s animated titles this year include “Zoom — The White Dolphin,” based on the cult 1970s toon series created by Vladimir Tartakovsky and Marc Bonnet, from France’s Media Valley and Marziban Films; and preschool series “Bobo,” about a curious young dormouse, from Cologne-based JEP Animation.