or all the concerns about linear channels losing audiences to streaming services, there is at least one terrestrial broadcaster that has maintained its market-leading position for the past seven years: ZDF. The German public broadcaster has a mix of programming that remains meaningful and relevant to a broad swath of the country’s audience. Its schedule runs the gamut, with everything from entertainment shows, high-end dramas that touch on social issues from the past and present and factual and current-affairs programs that offer context and discussion around pressing domestic and international topics. Its daily program heute, the newscast of record for Germans, saw its audience share increase in 2018.

Serving all members of German society is at the heart of ZDF’s mission as a public-service broadcaster. As society becomes increasingly polarized, ZDF Director-General Thomas Bellut feels that the broadcaster has a responsibility to promote democratic debate and dialogue among people with differing opinions. Bellut, who began his career as a journalist, is proud that ZDF’s news division combats “fake news” on a daily basis—this is particularly critical in the run-up to the European elections. And in children’s programming, aside from providing engaging entertainment and factual programming on ZDF and on KiKA—the children’s channel run jointly by ZDF and the other German public broadcaster, ARD—Bellut wants to help children become savvy media consumers.

Among all of the successes ZDF is enjoying as a channel, Bellut is intent on extending its content offering through a bouquet of websites, digital channels and apps, including funk, an online destination that targets a young audience. But Bellut doesn’t want to use the internet only to reach younger viewers. He wants ZDF to help explain the big, challenging issues to Germans of all ages and become “the first port of call” for culture on the internet.

As Bellut tells World Screen, ZDF strives to hold up a mirror to all aspects of German life. And in today’s interconnected world, Bellut also wants to bring the world to German citizens. For 25 years, ZDF Enterprises, the broadcaster’s commercial arm, has been participating in co-productions with a range of international partners, making programs available to ZDF that it may not have the resources to produce on its own. ZDF Enterprises also sells the best of ZDF’s content to outlets around the world. Its revenues, in turn, help the public broadcaster fulfill its mission.

WS: ZDF maintained good ratings in 2018. What programming strategies led to such strong performance?

BELLUT: In 2018, ZDF was the most-watched German TV channel for the seventh year in a row, with a market share of 13.9 percent. Viewers know that on ZDF they get high-quality programs with a wide range of content. Our program offering ranges from high-end series, such as Bad Banks and Purfum, to ambitious documentaries and satire. This programming formula works well. Nevertheless, we want to continually surprise our audience by providing new formats.

WS: What do viewers expect from ZDF? They have so many choices and even have to pay extra for several of them. What is ZDF’s unique selling proposition to license fee payers?

BELLUT: Our viewers expect a full range of programs that provide information, education and entertainment and give them an objective view of world affairs.

However, ZDF’s programming has a strong focus on information, which amounts to more than 40 percent of the overall schedule. Last year, heute journal was the most successful news magazine on German television, with a market share of 14.1 percent. The ZDF political talk show maybrit illner was also one of the leading discussion programs in 2018, with an average market share of 12.4 percent and 2.54 million viewers on average. And a program like auslandsjournal, which has been reporting foreign news for the last 45 years, demonstrates another of ZDF’s strengths: its global network of correspondents.
WS: The German population has become more diverse. Have societal changes been reflected in news or even in drama programming?

BELLUT: With our program offering we want to regularly reach everyone in Germany, regardless of their age, gender, background or level of education. That is why ZDF’s programming naturally also reflects changes in society. Social change—for example, issues concerning gender equality, the upbringing and education of children, the relationship between the young and the old, and the distribution of wealth—is a subject that is continually covered in a very wide range of programs, from information formats like ‘37°, plan b and ZDFzoom to dramas. A current example of a production featuring LGBTI characters is the ZDF thriller Getrieben, which was broadcast on February 25, 2019.

WS: How is ZDF making its programming available on multiple platforms and devices?

BELLUT: ZDF makes its programming available via a range of different linear and digital channels. Our most important online offering is ZDFmediathek. This online channel is gaining more and more viewers. The popular TV series ‘Ku’damm 56/59, Bad Banks’ and ‘Parfum’ topped the list of all nonlinear channel offerings in 2018. The series ‘Ku’damm 56/59, in particular, broke all records: the first episode of the second series was watched 2 million times, making it the most successful program so far on ZDFmediathek. Overall, 35 percent of Germans watch videos from ZDF’s online offering live or on catch-up at least occasionally, corresponding to a reach of 25 million users. The ZDF family of channels also includes ZDFInfo, the most successful documentary channel in the German television market. It achieves very good ratings, particularly in the target group of 14- to 49-year-olds. To reach target groups that don’t use our own online offerings, we also show our video content on third-party platforms—particularly YouTube and Facebook. Our satire formats ‘heute-show’ and ‘NEO MAGAZIN ROYALE’ are particularly in demand there, as are our science brands ‘Terra X’ and ‘Lesch & Co.’

WS: How has the online service funk been received? Does ZDF have plans to launch other streaming services?

BELLUT: We are very happy with the success of funk. Launched in October 2016, it is reaching more and more young viewers: 66 percent of 14- to 49-year-olds are familiar with funk or at least with one of the funk formats. Almost 50 percent of the target group have watched its content at least once. In a time of increasing polarization on the internet, the ARD/ZDF content network provides information as a public service for a young target group. In all, funk makes more than 60 regular formats available in the areas of information, education and entertainment.

But we don’t just ask ourselves how we can reach a younger audience. We also want to address the question of how ZDF can create a space for debates, encounters and even some surprising discoveries in a society that is becoming increasingly fragmented. As a social institution, we seek to challenge the loss of a culture of democratic debate and improve people’s overall understanding. One response is ZDFkultur, which has been broadcasting since

Cash or Trash is a format from ZDF Enterprises that is based on the hit ZDF series ‘Bares für Rares’.

328 WORLD SCREEN 4/19
February 13, 2019. We are concentrating our high-quality cultural programs in this digital cultural environment, editorially curating them and creating new digital content with a broad range of topics. Together with strong partners, such as museums, libraries, theaters and concert halls, we are offering a wide variety of opinions, knowledge and creativity. In short, with our new digital offering, ZDF is presenting itself as the first port of call on the internet for culture.

WS: What is the impact of Netflix and Amazon on the German media market? **BELLUT:** Streaming services represent competition that must be taken seriously. We are building on our online media library and continually refining it. Our first priority is to provide German TV viewers with high-quality, modern programs that are on par with those of our international competitors and to make them available via all channels. Our audience success demonstrates that we are on the right track with this aspiration.

With our highly polished series and mini-series, we are setting new quality standards and initiating social debate. The scope of content ranges from [period dramas] such as Tamnich and Ku’damm 56/59, to Bad Banks, which is set against the backdrop of the banking crisis. This year we will start shooting our international co-production *Der Schuarmp*. Frank Schätzing’s successful novel is being made into a high-end series that is sure to be another major TV event.

**WS:** We live in complicated times, and complicated times call for thorough, verifiable news coverage that doesn’t stop at headlines—it should also provide context. ZDF has always offered a variety of news and current-affairs programming. Given these challenging times, is ZDF broadening its news offering even further? **BELLUT:** In recent years there has been much debate in German society about the credibility of the media. However, surveys indicate that people trust public-service television. Together with the daily newspapers and the weekly magazines, public-service broadcasting achieves the highest credibility ratings from the German population. Nevertheless, we have noticed a significant increase in demand for reliable information and education. We, therefore, see it as a logical step to extend the *heute journal* from 15 minutes to 30 minutes on Sunday evenings—the most-watched evening of the week—starting on March 31, 2019.

With our discussion programs, we want to promote dialogue within society and counteract division. That’s why we are expanding our expertise in this genre. In the future, the range of topics dealt with in programs like *maybrit illner, Was nun, ...*? and Markus Lanz will be opened up further and the number of female guests will be increased. We consider this to be a key element of our public-service mandate.

Our online offering heute.de will also be expanded with interactive graphics, maps and animation as well as texts supported by multimedia. And, last but not least, it will include tailor-made online videos, created by a team of news and video editors working together in one newsroom.

**WS:** In how many different ways are you providing news and updates to viewers throughout the day? **BELLUT:** We give our viewers news whenever and wherever they want it: from *heute* at 7 p.m. to *heute journal*, *heute* and *heute Xpress* to heute.de and the heute app, which are available at all times on all platforms. The *heute* family scores points with viewers by offering a wide variety of informative programs via all channels. In addition, the news formats are continually and consistently being enhanced—on television, online and on social media.

WS: In many countries, people get the majority of their news from social media sites like Facebook. How do most Germans get their news? Do traditional media such as newspapers and TV newscasts attract readers and viewers? How do viewers regard ZDF’s *heute*? **BELLUT:** Television is by far the most frequently used source of news in Germany. And TV viewers particularly appreciate our competence in providing them with information, as I have already described. To give you another example: the market share of the 7 p.m. edition of *heute* increased last year to 17.1 percent from 16.3 percent in 2017.

**WS:** How is ZDF combating fake news, especially with the European elections coming in May? **BELLUT:** Fake news is dealt with by the ZDF editors as part of their daily work—in their research when checking the authenticity of photos and video, and as a topic to be reported on. With regard to our own work, two essential considerations are transparency and error management. Following the example of The New York Times, we have placed a “Corrections” section on our news homepage heute.de. We use this page to point out errors that we have made in our reporting and to correct them. In the run-up to the European elections, we are also setting up a ZDF-Fact-Check team, as we have done before for
ZDF has a strong commitment to children’s programming with services such as the daily newscast logo! and KIKA, a joint venture with ARD.

other elections. For example, the team examines statements made by politicians to verify their accuracy. The results are processed and published on TV, online and on social media.

**WS:** Besides offering entertainment programming, does ZDF serve children? Since children are the citizens of tomorrow, is ZDF also offering them factual information or helping them understand and use media wisely?

**BELLUT:** For 30 years now, ZDF has been producing logo!, the only daily news program for children on German television. Throughout this time, we have been covering complex news topics in this program in a way that makes them appropriate for children and easy to understand. For more than 20 years, KIKA, the children’s channel from ARD and ZDF, has been reliably providing children of all ages with information and guidance, and parents hold the channel in high esteem.

In addition to the TV offering, there is the preschool portal kikaninchen.de, the children’s offering kika.de, the adults’ offering erwachsen.kika.de and KIKA teletext, HbbTV and third-party platforms (YouTube and Facebook), as well as mobile apps. These telemedia offerings are free from advertising and sponsorship and provide a variety of multimedia content that is designed to be interactive and appropriate for children. As we do in the TV offering, we provide information, education, advice and entertainment for children between the ages of 3 and 13 on the internet. This offering has also been designed to be a safe space where young users can explore the internet in fun way and gain media skills at the same time.

**WS:** How does ZDF Enterprises contribute to ZDF? What is your vision for ZDF Enterprises?

**BELLUT:** ZDF Enterprises has been successfully acting as an independent market player for more than 25 years. The company has vast experience, an outstanding reputation and interacts with ZDF as its shareholder based on the arm’s length principle. Its two main areas of business are the rights and license trade and the management of an efficient portfolio of media companies it owns stakes in.

Due to its experience in international activities, its comprehensive network, and its proficient staff with extensive knowledge of worldwide markets and industries, ZDF Enterprises is able to provide us with information on the latest programming trends and production and economic developments at a very early stage.

As a public broadcaster, ZDF cannot operate as flexibly or take the same risks in the marketplace as a private company. For this reason, ZDF Enterprises is often our co-production partner in the realization of important projects at both a national and international level, acquiring additional rights at its own risk. At the same time, the company’s global success also strengthens ZDF’s reputation as an innovative and high-quality broadcaster. And finally, ZDF Enterprises is economically successful and its profits contribute to the fulfillment of our mission as a public broadcaster.

**WS:** What are the most significant opportunities and challenges facing ZDF in the next 12 to 24 months?

**BELLUT:** In the coming years, we will face the challenge of introducing a younger audience to our various information and entertainment offerings and making it easy for them to find that content. To this end, we are going to expand our online service Mediathek and our news offering heute.de appropriately.

A further challenge is the current boom in TV series. It is leading to increased competition for the best creatives and the best material. This applies not only at an international level but also in Germany. ZDF, as the largest purchaser in the German TV production industry, is well positioned. Our skilled and experienced editors work closely and well with a lot of producers. As a result, we will continue to be the first contact for creatives in Germany and thus be able to offer our viewers high-quality series and miniseries.