Getting Off The Fence

There’s arguably no greater barometer of where the factual TV business is right now than ZDF’s acquisition of Off the Fence, writes Jonathan Webdale.

In the era of on-demand television, broadcasters and producers alike are having to retool their businesses in order to keep pace with accelerating technological change and audience content consumption habits.

In October last year Dutch factual producer and distributor Off The Fence (OTF) took steps towards these ends, partnering with Irish technology firm Axonista to launch its own VoD service. The WaterBear Network, billed as a VoD platform dedicated to the future of the planet, was announced by OTF director of strategy and business development Victor Eckard at the annual Wildscreen Festival in Bristol, where the company has its UK base.

OTF signed up a string of NGO partners to support WaterBear, including a variety of national World Wide Fund for Nature operations, Tusk and African Parks, with the ambition not only of offering viewers premium factual programming but the ability to then act on their passions and engage with organisations working to make a positive environmental impact.

A few months later, OTF was acquired by ZDF Enterprises (ZDFE). The commercial arm of the German public broadcaster paid an undisclosed sum for 100% of the non-fiction specialist, which was set up by Ellen Windemuth 25 years ago.

As an independent that has created more than 500 hours of factual programming for the likes of the BBC, PBS, Discovery and National Geographic and with a sales catalogue spanning some 6,500 hours, OTF had inevitably been the subject of takeover speculation on numerous occasions, in line with the natural eb and flow of industry consolidation.

As a pubcaster that’s been in existence for more than half a century, ZDF is wrestling with the same paradigm shift in consumer behaviour ushered in by the internet that its contemporaries face elsewhere. The need to add further firepower to its enterprises group has become more pressing.

After attempts at launching a joint-venture VoD service with compatriot network ARD was thwarted by German competition authorities in 2013, ZDF has continued to pursue opportunities and partnered with France Télévisions and Italy’s Rai last year to launch a drama alliance.

It also aligned with ProSiebenSat.1 and Discovery with the aim of creating a supercharged version of the pair’s existing 7TV streaming operation, with ARD and RTL also invited onboard in the hope that regulators won’t once again scupper their attempts to counter the growing impact of US entrants like Netflix and Amazon.

It’s within this context that OTF joins the ZDFE fold, an acquisition followed shortly after by ZDFE’s addition of Constantin’s 49% stake in German drama specialist Nadcon Film, an early pioneer in the development of Nordic noir. Not only does OTF boost the commercial arm’s already substantial ZDFE-unscripted vertical through which the two have been long-term collaborators, but it also, via the nascent WaterBear, expands the latter’s VoD interests.

“Every content company has to futureproof itself,” says Windemuth. “When I started OTF in 1994, starting a company that did production as well as distribution was a revolutionary idea. We called it an ‘integrated content company.’ We set out to...”

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Foxtel names lifestyle group GM

Australia’s largest pay TV platform, Foxtel, has named a veteran magazine publisher as the general manager of its lifestyle group. Wendy Moore will oversee all aspects of Foxtel brands Lifestyle, Lifestyle Home and Lifestyle Food across streaming, broadcast and digital.

In addition to overseeing Foxtel Original lifestyle shows including Selling Houses Australia, Grand Designs Australia, Love It Or List It, The Great Australian Bake Off and Gogglebox Australia, she will take charge of international acquisitions to stream on Foxtel.

Moore spent the past 12 years at Seven West Media’s Pacific Magazines, where she led the growth and development of brands such as Home Beautiful and Better Homes & Gardens as general manager of homes and food. She takes over from Hannah Barnes, who left last October.

Brian Walsh, Foxtel’s executive director of TV, said: “I know that Wendy will bring to the table an incredible wealth of lifestyle insight and knowledge, making her the ideal person to breathe new life into our Lifestyle group.”

She will start on April 29, reporting to Stephen Baldwin, director of Foxtel networks and on-demand.
own more of the food chain than as just a producer or a distributor. Being an old-school integrated content company is no longer enough, you need a proper digital strategy as well.

"I did feel there was a missing piece and that was a very interactive digital platform. I thought of that with my colleagues seven years ago and we've been developing it ever since, culminating in the WaterBear presentation in October. ZDFE agreed with that vision and said we need to work with SVoD but we need to work with them in a way that we really have guaranteed cash backflow."

Windemuth admits that OTF needed additional resources to realise its VoD vision. "I did think about doing it alone, but when you're running a production and distribution company active all over the world and you're also chairperson of the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival board, which is working with the UN and has a festival every year - to say that in your copious amounts of free time you're going to start an interactive SVoD platform... You'd think twice before you did that alone."

The OTF acquisition was initiated by ZDFE, unscripted VP Ralf Rückauer - who has focused on factual at the company since joining in 2008 and as a result has known Windemuth for more than 15 years - and was signed off by ZDFE president and CEO Fred Burcksen.

"The management of ZDFE knew slightly different people from the ones I know," says Windemuth. "The other benefit is when we can collaborate, we're definitely stronger together. Ralf and our distribution arms will be stronger together when it comes to output deals. And in future-proofing the companies, working together on WaterBear makes a lot of sense."

The initial plan was for Windemuth and Rückauer to maintain their existing roles with their respective companies, collaborating on a case-by-case basis. But in February a reorganisation was announced that sees the pair becoming OTF joint-CEOs, suggesting perhaps the company's founder has one eye on her exit strategy, or at least returning more to her production roots.

Windemuth is currently exec producing a feature doc in South Africa about a man who spent eight years swimming in cold water filming a sea forest and forging a special relationship with an octopus. "It's like nothing I've ever seen before. It will blow your socks off," she promises.

The apparent boom the feature doc segment has enjoyed has largely come about as a result of investment from streamers.

"Netflix has done a tremendous amount of good for it," says Windemuth. "All the films that commissioning editors at conventional TV channels didn't believe in, Netflix believed in, and once they believed in these films everybody thought, 'Oh, maybe the ratings aren't so bad, maybe our advertisers will come on board.'"

"It has liberated us filmmakers so that we can do projects we couldn't have dreamed of five years ago. We have more buyers, more money and there's more trust in innovation. We are producing a film at the moment about the circular economy. I could never have got that financed five years ago. We have Netflix to thank for this."

The paradox is the recalibration of broadcasters such companies have caused, presenting challenges for the producers and distributors that supply them and prompting the kind of consolidation the ZDFE/OTF deal exemplifies. Are mid-range independent players sustainable any longer?

"A mid-level indie media company is still very viable, it just depends on the people and the strategy. If you're a great salesperson and you have solid financial backing, it's still doable," says Windemuth. "Companies have to keep starting and growing to medium size, and then some reinvent themselves, some sell, some become huge. It's vital that we have a proper flow-through in this industry."

"The place where it's super-tough is in formats and reality programming, but we don't produce formats or reality. When you talk to US Indies, they very often have a crippling experience from having to make not only a promo reel, but a proof of concept and then they often go way over budget while they go through the development process. That's never been a problem for Ralf or me."

"We won't be expanding out of factual. ZDFE is very focused on high-quality primetime crime, great access primetime drama and natural history, and history on the non-fiction side. That focus is something we share. We are focused on high-quality non-fiction with a long shelf life. We love selling science, history, wildlife and lifestyle. We don't produce lifestyle, but we love selling the WE tv catalogue, our buyers love it and we do very well with it. The key is to stay focused on what you do best and work with the people you like."

Interview by Clive Whittingham

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**BBC2 reveals content ambitions**

UK pubcaster BBC2's controller Patrick Holland has unveiled a variety of new factual entertainment shows he says demonstrate the "scale and depth" he is looking for. The Claim (6x60) sees six couples competing to win a remote home in Alaska and requires contestants to retrace the steps of a man who was the last person to claim five acres of virgin land under the American Homestead Act and is looking for an heir to the property. Twelve is also behind Who Should Get a British Passport? (working title), which explores the UK immigration system, while

Label is The Family Brain Games (8x60) sees eight families compete to determine which is the most intelligent. The shows "demonstrate our ambitions in terms of the scale and depth of storytelling on the channel," said Holland. "The Claim and Family Brain Games continue the rejuvenation of factual entertainment on the channel, following the recent successes of The Great British Sewing Bee and the launch of Race Across the World. Who Should get a British Passport? shows our commitment to the most important timely stories in peak, asking challenging questions about the biggest issues," he added.