Public broadcasters have often been at the forefront in offering to their audiences provocative and unique content that might otherwise never see the light of day. Continuing this tradition is ZDF Enterprises, the commercial arm of German pubcaster ZDF. Following last year's merger of its entertainment and factual divisions into ZDFE.unscripted, overseen by Rolf Rückauer, the international content distributor, buyer and coproducer recently acquired Ellen Windemuth's Dutch non-fiction production/distribution company Off The Fence, with Rückauer now serving as co-CEO of the company with Windemuth. RealScreen reached out to ZDFE CEO and president Fred Burcksen to learn more about what's on the table for the company in the months ahead, and his take on the trends shaping the international non-fiction content market.

**THE CLOSE-UP:**

**FRED BURCKSEN**

**ZDF ENTERPRISES**

How does the acquisition of Off The Fence (OTF) fit into ZDFE's strategy going forward? What was the impetus for that move? With the acquisition of OTF, we wanted to increase our sales power and global sales presence within our unscripted industry. Also, OTF has a very effective and boutique-style production entity in Bristol that fits very well within our portfolio of production companies. Furthermore, OTF and ZDFE.unscripted share the same vision when it comes to the future importance of local and global VOD platforms that are focusing on factual and unscripted content.

We have worked with OTF and Ellen Windemuth and her team for two decades and have always admired their vision and achievement. In our discussions with Ellen, both sides were convinced that teaming up would help us create a stronger market position and an opportunity for new synergies.

Coproduction has been an integral part of ZDFE's business. How do you see the copro world evolving for factual content? Yes, ZDFE.unscripted has always been investing not only in the output from our network, ZDF, but also in good content from third parties, thus creating a strong market presence and catalog. With the new platform players, new challenges and opportunities have arisen. But the business model remains the same: if you want to produce something you will need to get it financed, whereby the one who contributes the biggest share of the budget will have the biggest say.

What are the challenges in working with non-linear platforms as a distributor? We embrace the opportunities and chances that we are being provided with by the entry of VOD platforms to the market. Depending on the scope of rights that the respective platform acquires, the volume of remaining distribution rights might reduce.

ZDF is working with numerous European broadcasters on funding premium scripted content, to rival that coming from such major SVOD services as Netflix. Similarly, do you see ZDF Enterprises developing its own SVOD or partnering on a pan-Euro streamer? ZDFE.unscripted has already launched various factual channels – for instance, on Amazon and the German telecom platform Magenta TV. More channels will be launched during the course of the year. At the same time, and together with OTF, we are considering the strategic option to launch our own VOD platform.

What can you tell us about ZDFE's growth strategy for 2019, and looking forward to 2020? As with each year we are looking to increase our turnover from distribution content and our profit accordingly. As far as our production companies are concerned, we feel that with our portfolio we are positioned very well. We will therefore not be actively looking for new acquisition opportunities, but if an interesting opportunity pops up we will, of course, look into that. Selina Chignall