As the country with the biggest economy in Europe but one of the smallest communities of children’s TV producers, Germany has long held a reputation as the “sleeping giant” of the continent’s animation industry. There’s little likelihood that giant will be woken any time soon — with the lack of a tax credit system to rival those in France or the UK being cited as the main reason. Nevertheless, Germany remains a vibrant place for children to watch and stream content.

Public broadcaster KiKa and its commercial rival Super RTL are practically neck and neck in the ratings, with both channels enjoying an annual market share of around 20% among three- to 13-year-olds.

These two channels, says Super RTL’s deputy programme director and head of acquisitions Frank Dietz, are in the “premier league,” while Disney Channel and Nickelodeon are both in the league below, with shares hovering around 10%.

The Mouse House launched a free-to-air Disney Channel in Germany in 2014, despite already having a presence in the market via its 50% ownership of Super RTL, which it still holds. Since then, Disney programmes have moved off Super RTL, which replaced them via an output deal with DreamWorks Animation (DWA).

Meanwhile, US streaming services Netflix and Amazon Prime compete with several local players in the SVoD market, including Vivendi-owned Watchever, Super RTL’s online kids’ service Kivido and ProsiebenSat.1-owned Maxdome.

Then there’s the surprisingly resilient DVD market, which has not declined in the same dramatic manner as elsewhere in Europe, despite the SVoD growth. “We’re kind of late adopters when it comes to new technologies,” explains Dietz.

Hans Ulrich Stooff, CEO of German children’s media company M4E, producer and distributor of well-known brands such as Mie & Me and nearly 2,000 episodes of children’s and family programmes, believes kids’ broadcasting in Germany is strong. And as the boss of one of the country’s biggest distributors, he is reluctant to criticise the local industry too severely, but admits that working in Germany presents a unique set of challenges.

“The biggest of these is that local producers continue to be hampered by a lack of support from the government. “We don’t have the same tax credit systems as elsewhere in Europe, so it’s a little bit of an unfair competition,” says Stooff.

“On the television side, we’re competing with the UK, Ireland, Luxembourg, Italy, even Belgium and, of course, France. But we don’t have anything.”

“THERE are limited subsidies but most of them are only available to give...”

Wind Dancer sets up children’s arm

US producer Wind Dancer Films has appointed one of its veteran execs to head a new children’s division. Dete Merveze has been a member of Wind Dancer’s executive team for 15 years and will now lead the studio’s push into animated children’s content. The LA firm, which produced the feature film What Women Want and series such as Home Improvement, received its first kids commission last year with Ready Jet Go!

Created by Hey Arnold! and Dinosaur Train’s Craig Bartlett, the animated series airs on PBS Kids in the US and is being sold worldwide by distributor Cake Entertainment. Joining Merveze at the children’s arm as VP of animation will be Rusty Tracy, who previously worked on Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles at Nickelodeon Animation Studios. Other kids projects in development with Wind Dancer include Not A Box, based on the book by Antoinette Portis. Wind Dancer also recently established an animation studio in Glendale, California.

“Our move into animated kids TV is a natural outgrowth of the hundreds of hours of family TV and sitcoms we have produced for primetime,” said Merveze.
a project that initial push to start production and help get the first 13 episodes made. That’s it.”

Stoef says he wishes the German Producers Alliance would be more proactive, lobby the government more effectively and “stop their hashing of the public broadcasters.”

One option could be to introduce a system where the private broadcasters, as well as the public ones, are obliged to take a certain amount of programming from the domestic market, says Stoef.

Such a quota wouldn’t sit well with Dietz, who emphasises that, as a commercial channel, Super RTL needs to be free to scout the market for the best content possible to try to bring in the maximum number of viewers.

“At the end of the day it comes down to where to get the best content. If that’s Germany, then that’s fantastic,” says Dietz, who has recently acquired series such as The Deep and Bob The Builder to sit alongside the channel’s programming from IFA.

Indeed, the blame for Germany’s small production pool is often laid squarely with local channels such as KiKA and Super RTL, who many believe should commission more local programming rather than acquire it from the international market.

Along with M4S, German children’s business Your Family Entertainment (YFE) is a survivor in an industry that has teetered on “extinction,” particularly between 2005 and 2010, according to the latter’s CEO, Dr Stefan Pichl.

The country’s public broadcasters did too much business with foreign producers rather than local firms, says Pichl, causing distributors such as TV Loeveland to enter administration and have their assets sold.

But producers shouldn’t pin their hopes on YFE being the industry’s saviour, given that the company, which operates pay channel Fix & Foxi and free-to-air net RIC both at home and abroad, makes around 80% of its turnover outside Germany.

“There is very little being generated in Germany at the moment,” says Pichl, whose company claims one of the largest independent programme libraries in Europe.

It’s from this that the schedules of Fix & Foxi and RIC are filled, alongside acquisitions, which Pichl says the firm is looking to increase, as long as series are available in German, Spanish, Arabic, French and English for the various channel feeds it has around the world.

However, ask a local broadcaster and the situation for German producers looks a little more rosy. Sebastian Deberlin, head of fiction, acquisition and coproduction at KiKA, says there has been a change in some of the productions coming from local producers in terms of exportability.

“I see a very positive development with some creative partners as well as animation studies that serve local taste on one hand and can also cater to international audiences,” says Deberlin, pointing to the example of M4S’s globetrotting Min & Me.

KiKA is highly active on the international market, acquiring series from all around the world and also coming on board as coproduction partner, as in the case of the second season of Northern Irish toon Lily’s Driftwood Bay.

Finding more projects closer to home to join series such as the much loved Die Sendung mit der Maus (The Programme With the Mouse), however, has been a priority for the veteran executive. Now it appears his efforts are beginning to bear fruit.

“We currently have a number of projects in production and in the pipeline with German studios like Hahn Film, Motionworks, Studio Film Bilder and Wanderwerk, just to name a few: Those, like a good number of other studios, understand the need to catch both tastes,” says Deberlin.

One of these projects is the crowd-drenching show Animaniacs (26 x 4’), from Stuttgart-based Studio Film Bilder, which was pitched at Cartoon Forum in Toulouse last year.

Thomas Meyer-Hermann, the company’s founder and MD, is philosophical about working in Germany, having launched the company himself 25 years ago. “Maybe we will always complain because the situation will never be so good that we will be happy. Producing is a tough job these days. And it is possible that in Germany it’s even more difficult.”

The nature of Germany’s fragmented public television market, which mirrors the country’s federal system that splits the country into 16 states, means decision-making between channels can take a lot of time, admits Meyer-Hermann.

The producer is making steady headway, however, getting his aforementioned preschool series off the ground with both KiKA and regional broadcaster SWR and selling another SWR-backed series, Patchwork Pals (26 x 4’), to Cbeebies in the UK.

The charming little show is a spin-off from Film Bilder and SWR’s preschool cartoon series I Know An Animal. Each episode sees one of the animals encounter a problem, while the other team up to help find a solution. This being a preschool series, they invariably do.

If only Meyer-Hermann could set them to work on what he believes is the German animation industry’s biggest problem: the brain drain of →
talented animators leaving the country to find work elsewhere.

“We have promising talent coming out of our animation schools who don't have many chances to get into the industry. Some go abroad, some change their profession,” says Meyer-Hermann. “It's not just the fault of the TV channels, as some production companies are not really interested in the talent.”

M&F's Steel agrees that there is plenty of talent in Germany that goes unappreciated locally, to the benefit of producers overseas.

“We have great schools, like Filmakademie Baden-Württemberg in Ludwigsburg, which delivers a lot of talent to Hollywood in terms of CG animation. Seeing them have to leave the country is a problem,” says Stoof. It's a particular shame given that there is some terrific IP coming out of Germany at the moment, he adds.

Historically, publishing has been a fertile breeding ground for animated series in Germany, with classic characters such as Maya der Bee being developed into popular series. And the next big thing tipped to be turned into a toon is Stolperkreuz (literally Worry Rerun), a toy property from the same mind behind Mia & Ma, Gerd Hahn.

And just as the introduction of a tax break in 2013 has helped rejuvenate the local animation industry in the UK, there are hopes that a similar scheme would stimulate growth in Germany.

Talk about a brain drain and lobbying the government for tax relief is nothing new. However, the momentum that seemed to be building in 2012 around the subject seems to have fizzled out.

What Germany appears to be lacking is a concerted effort on the part of the local industry to lobby as one group to make their voice heard, as was the case with Animation UK. “There is the need to launch a campaign for the tax break. We need to work hard to finally have some conditions and chances in a harmonised European animation landscape,” says Dechert.

European partners already value the resources German companies can bring to partnerships, says Nicole Keel, head of international coproductions and acquisitions in the children's and youth department at pubcaster ZDF. This would only increase should the country introduce the hallowed tax break.

Recent series ZDF has invested in the international market include the hybrid live-action/CGI series Seven & Me, a family-friendly sitcom aimed at children aged four to eight.

ZDF is particularly active in the international market because of the lack of what Keel describes as an “optimal funding system” for TV series production. “The channels usually have to invest the full amount of the production costs and you can't do that 10 times a year,” she says.

News from C21Media.net

DreamWorks extends reach in Asia

Thai terrestrial broadcaster Channel 5 is adding DreamWorks Animation (DNA) series to its daily schedule following a distribution deal with the US studio. DNA series such as ‘Alfie King Julien’ and ‘The Adventures of Puss in Boots’ airs on Channel 5 every weekday between 17:30 and 18:00, while ‘Dragons: Race to the Edge’ will be scheduled between 07:20 and 07:50 at the weekend. The deal makes Channel 5 the first free-to-air network in Asia to feature a DNA programming block, according to Eric Ellenbogen, co-head of international TV at DWA.

The moves comes after DWA partnered with local pay TV providers in Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia to roll out its first branded TV network, DreamWorks Channel, in Asia. DreamWorks Channel arrived in Singapore on March 3 via Starhub and follows launches in Thailand and Malaysia. Claiming to feature more original content than any other kids' channel in Asia, the network will also be launched as an on-demand channel on Starhub's pay TV platform. Available in both English and Mandarin, its initial programme line-up includes DW-produced series such as ‘Dragons: Race to the Edge and Dinosaur.'