



ZDF

Visit ZDF website



Alerts

Overview

Ownership

Schedule

Data & prices

In Development

Contacts

ZDF – Germany

(Updated 14/01/2021)

SCHEDULE WATCH PROFILE: German pubcaster ZDF is on the lookout for more acquired fare for its renowned factual strand Terra X. Gün Akyuz reports.



Johannes Geiger

German pubcaster ZDF is has flagged a challenge around securing wildlife fare for its long-running Terra X strand due to the pandemic.

Talking at last month's World Congress of Science and Factual Producers (WCSFP), Terra X deputy head of department Johannes Geiger said the need had emerged since the pandemic has prevented producers from travelling internationally.

"What we find more difficult to acquire is wildlife and natural history because people don't tend to travel as much at the moment, to sit in trees and film other creatures do stuff. That's something we find harder to produce ourselves than, for example, historical content," said Geiger, talking to moderator Aaron Hancox, VP of unscripted content at Canadian prodco Markham Street Films, about the strand's requirements.

The emphasis since the start of the pandemic has been to "make sure our local producers get through the pandemic, and to produce within Germany," said Geiger.

This shift has also affected coproductions, with Geiger explaining that "we need to really keep our budgets within our own ranks at the moment and make sure that that local producers get through the pandemic all right."



Terra X airs BBC Natural History Unit shows such as Seven Worlds, One Planet

Instead, the strand has "resorted to buying finished projects abroad. Sometimes we buy a three-piece series and edit it down to a two one-hour German version or a 45-minute German version," Geiger said. Specifically addressing WCSFP delegates, he added: "What I can offer here is to look at all your almost finished, or already finished, productions that you're keen on selling."

Long-running Terra X is home to a range of documentary genres, from science, history and archaeology to natural history and wildlife. Last year it reached an average 14.1% linear share of German viewers in its Sunday primetime slot at 19.30 on ZDF.

Terra X also has an extensive online presence. "Currently, we run four YouTube channels and two Instagram channels. We have a Facebook

channel and we have a big VoD platform that we fill with our documentaries," said Geiger.

In fact, Terra X's digital presence adds a substantial amount of viewing, with its online VoD service generating 444,000 subscribers and 17.5 million viewers last fall. Its YouTube channels attracted an average of 2.1 million views in 2020, with digital show Terra X Lesch & Co pulling in 2.8 million in October, while its Facebook channel attracted 24.7 million views last year.

"We have many young presenters in those digital shows. But the traditionally linear 45-minute documentaries are often presenter-led and some of them are very well known in Germany," Geiger said.

Terra X is responsible for commissioning around 50 documentaries a year. Typically, between six and eight are in-house productions, a further 30 are made by German independent producers and up to 12 are international coproductions.

One programming source is ZDF's strategic content partnership with BBC Studios (BBCS), across scripted and unscripted. The partnership includes landmark BBC natural history assets like last year's Seven Worlds, One Planet from BBCS's Natural History Unit (NHU) and the BBC's ongoing Planet franchise, which have aired on Terra X.



2020 hit Anthropocene – The Rise of Humans was produced in house

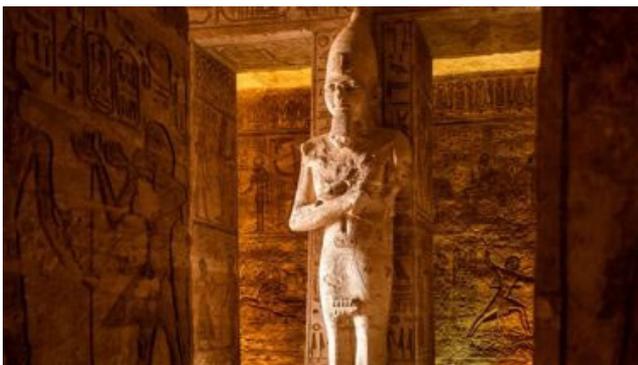
animation and cutting-edge laser scans to show cross-sections of ancient monuments, was produced by Interscience GmbH for ZDF and ZDFE, with CuriosityStream boarding as an early pre-buyer. Both series are distributed by ZDFE.

Terra X has also fielded a number of smaller productions featuring dramatisations, said Geiger, including one that looked at daily life in Ancient Rome. "We're now doing Dresden in 1946 to really get a feel of what people's lives looked like," the exec added.

ZDF usually talks to lots of international producers across the year. It also tends to discuss bigger copro projects with international partners from a very early stage, said Geiger. "But at the moment, it's very difficult to commit money very early into projects. It's really the way we work at the moment... [but] we look at almost finished projects and see whether they could fit our portfolio," he added.

That acquisition and coproduction strategy comes via ZDF's acquisitions and distribution subsidiary ZDFE, which is a regular copro partner for ZDF and the pubcaster's other digital channels.

"Our goal is... to negotiate any kind of acquisition deals on top of ZDF," said Nikolas Huelbusch, manager of ZDFE Unscripted, whose department focuses on distributing programmes made or commissioned by ZDF or for third-party producers as well as international coproductions.



Planet of Treasures – A History of Mankind examines world heritage sites

Among Terra X's hits of 2020 is in-house-produced Anthropocene – The Rise of Humans (3x52'), coproduced with commercial arm ZDF Enterprises (ZDFE). Describing the series as one of the highlights of Terra X's spring 2020 line-up, Geiger said it examined, "how man has changed the planet and has destroyed it in many places, but also how man manages to find remedies now and tries to right the wrong."

Another was six-parter Planet of Treasures – A History of Mankind. Exploring world heritage sites around the globe, the show is fronted by Cambridge history professor Christopher Clark. "It's become almost like an archive of these sites," said Geiger. The 4K series, featuring 3D-

animation and cutting-edge laser scans to show cross-sections of ancient monuments, was produced by Interscience GmbH for ZDF and ZDFE, with CuriosityStream boarding as an early pre-buyer. Both series are distributed by ZDFE.

Terra X has also fielded a number of smaller productions featuring dramatisations, said Geiger, including one that looked at daily life in Ancient Rome. "We're now doing Dresden in 1946 to really get a feel of what people's lives looked like," the exec added.

ZDF usually talks to lots of international producers across the year. It also tends to discuss bigger copro projects with international partners from a very early stage, said Geiger. "But at the moment, it's very difficult to commit money very early into projects. It's really the way we work at the moment... [but] we look at almost finished projects and see whether they could fit our portfolio," he added.

That acquisition and coproduction strategy comes via ZDF's acquisitions and distribution subsidiary ZDFE, which is a regular copro partner for ZDF and the pubcaster's other digital channels.

"Our goal is... to negotiate any kind of acquisition deals on top of ZDF," said Nikolas Huelbusch, manager of ZDFE Unscripted, whose department focuses on distributing programmes made or commissioned by ZDF or for third-party producers as well as international coproductions.

Among other projects featuring international partners alongside Terra X and ZDFE, Huelbusch highlighted 4K production Humboldt: Epic Explorer (1x50'), produced by Spiegel TV for ZDF, with Arte, ZDFE and Smithsonian Networks on board as coproducers.

Huelbusch said his division's international distribution formula was simple: it looks for specialist factual content around history, science and wildlife to distribute and co-fund, and tends to avoid current affairs, social issues, and arts and culture. "Although these documentaries might be great, it's not what we're looking for because it's not what our clients are looking for," he explained.

ZDFE doesn't have preferred country partnerships, but Huelbusch advised: "All the productions we back have an international look and feel, and experts from various countries, with a high visual standard and with global topics that are understandable for audiences all over the world. And they need to be timeless, to a certain extent – that's one reason we are not involved in politics or current affairs."

ZDFE's unscripted slate is currently "very well stocked," said Huelbusch, noting that the company had been lucky enough to have ordered lot of programmes just before the pandemic took hold. One of them is new 35x50' series Great Inventions, featuring inventions that are now integral to daily life, from suspension bridges, the X-rays and satellites to computer games, genetic engineering and condoms. Episodes within the series are produced by ZDFE-owned Off the Fence, doc.station, World Media Rights and k22.

"We were simply lucky that most of the programmes we had were either not affected at all by Covid or were in the final phase. Of course, that shouldn't be underestimated. For example, some production companies had problems getting the archive footage from the final post production because archive houses were closed for a certain time."

ZDFE's main role as a distributor and gap financier means it's best to approach it with projects that already have a producer and one or two broadcasters on board. "We would be much more likely to commit if all the other boxes are ticked," Huelbusch explained, although he added that there would be one or two exceptions in any given year where the company would board projects at a development stage.

In the absence of live markets, email is the preferred initial contact route, he advised. "I am always happy to talk to people. And even if the



4K production Humboldt: Epic Explorer

big money bag is not opened right away, at least I can give people a hint or an idea whether it's something that would really work for us or something I would recommend [taking] to another distributor."

Budgets cover a huge range, said Geiger, noting that ZDF can contribute in-house-sized commissioning budgets to big flagship copros such as the BBC's Planet franchise.

Huelbusch said budgets ultimately come down to "case by case" discussions with producers, but added: "We could say that Terra X as a coproduction partner can contribute a substantial part of the production budget."

He also encouraged external producers to visit ZDF's website for further information on pitching to ZDF and its numerous factual strands and digital channels [zdfinfo](#) and [zdf.kultur](#), [zdf_neo](#) and [zdf.history](#).
