

THOMAS BELLUT ZDF



By Anna Carugati

Since its launch in 1961, ZDF (Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen), the second public broadcaster in Germany, has been offering its audience news, information, sports, entertainment and drama. Over the decades, as the German TV landscape has witnessed the mushrooming of commercial channels and the subsequent fragmentation of the audience, ZDF has set up its own bouquet of digital services: ZDFneo for documentaries, ZDFinfo and ZDFkultur. The main channel, ZDF, continues to attract the lion's share of German viewers. The program *heute* remains the newscast of record in Germany. Historical and current-affairs documentaries, cop series and topical TV movies are still extremely popular but, as Director-General Thomas Bellut explains, ZDF has been reaching out to younger viewers on the main channel and online.

TV EUROPE: ZDF had strong ratings in 2014. What contributed to such a good performance, and how have ratings been so far in 2015?

BELLUT: Indeed, ZDF was by far the market leader in the first six months of 2015. With a 12.8-percent audience share, we were one percentage point ahead of ARD. The third strongest broadcaster—RTL—scored 10 percent. We've succeeded in compensating for earlier weaknesses in the daytime schedule. Now we're proud of our positive performance in prime time, too. We've committed ourselves seriously to the development of programs. ZDF is currently the broadcaster with the most innovative programming. Even if these innovations aren't all hits, they strengthen the acceptance and image of the broadcaster. The best example is *heute-show*, a satirical news magazine that gets good ratings and makes a strong impact on the broadcaster's image, in particular with younger audiences.

TV EUROPE: Would you give us a sense of how competitive the German TV market has become? Within this environment, what is the role of a public broadcaster?

BELLUT: The German TV market is highly competitive. With the advance of digitization, the number of commercial broadcasters has multiplied significantly. A large number of smaller, special-interest channels, including some with microscopic ratings, can be added up together to be considerable competition. It is also encouraging that the market share of the public broadcasters' offerings has held steady at more than 45 percent of total viewership. In Germany, we reach a vast audience with our mix of news, documentaries, fiction, entertainment, culture and sports. What's very important here is that we generate great trust from the credibility of our news programs. This is why we're constantly working on expanding the quality of our reporting. Today, because [such a huge volume] of unverified and often interest-motivated news is found online, reliable sources of information are irreplaceable. And here, politically and economically independent public broadcasters guarantee such top-quality reporting.

TV EUROPE: In which parts of ZDF's schedule would you like to see improvement?

BELLUT: Our schedule functions well. We put great emphasis on the reliability of our programming. Audiences appreciate this. But we do still have a few weak spots in our weekend daytime schedule. A few program transitions don't function quite right yet. We're working on this.

TV EUROPE: How are ZDF's various digital channels serving different audience segments?

BELLUT: Over the past years, we've built up our digital channels one by one. Today, ZDF is a family of channels that reaches the younger demographics in particular with varied offerings. I am delighted that ZDFinfo—a purely informative channel—now has a market share of 1 percent and has since built up an audience of younger viewers. ZDFneo targets a family audience that enjoys series, docu-soaps, comedy and factual-entertainment formats. The channel now brings in a 1.6-percent average share.

TV EUROPE: What has ZDF been doing to attract young viewers?

BELLUT: We began by focusing on the 25- to 50-year-olds. This is the core target group of our digital channels, and we also emphasize this demographic in our main channel without neglecting older audiences. Of course, we disseminate our content on the web as well—on personal YouTube channels, for example, but above all via our own video portal.

It is perfectly possible to bring our ZDF brands to people who hardly watch linear television anymore. The *heute-show* reaches high on-demand figures online. On ZDFneo we have another satire format, *Neo Magazin Royale* with Jan Böhmermann, which has a huge fan base. There, too, the reach is greater online than on the linear channel. Together with ARD, we are currently preparing content specially produced for young people, exclusively for the internet. This project chiefly addresses the 13-to-29 age group and, as it's geared solely for the web, it will be targeted in a way that corresponds to the viewing habits of kids and young adults.

TV EUROPE: How are you using social media to engage with viewers, particularly young ones?

BELLUT: Our editorial departments make intensive use of social-media platforms in order to interact with viewers and provide additional services. ZDF has many Twitter channels and Facebook pages. Many journalists and TV hosts tweet about their work and their observations. We repeatedly organize events in which we involve our fans. When we offered a preview of a miniseries online last spring, we [said that if viewers sent out at least 25,000 tweets with a certain hashtag, we would preview the last episode online, and that worked quite well].

TV EUROPE: In how many different ways can viewers enjoy ZDF programming?

BELLUT: Our content can be viewed live or time-delayed on practically all broadcasting devices. We've built a high-performance on-demand portal—ZDF Mediathek—through which we can access many live streams. Distribution is optimized for all familiar types of devices.

Yet, in spite of all our euphoric observations on the new possibilities for content, we should not ignore the fact that the classical linear form of television has hardly transformed itself. The average German still watches more than four hours of linear television every day.

TV EUROPE: What have you been learning about how ZDF viewers watch programming? What are they watching on live television, and what are they watching as catch-up, or online or on mobile devices?

BELLUT: In the nonlinear domain, there is a particularly strong demand for our comedy formats. Nonetheless, our series and



The German crime drama *Blochin: The Living and the Dead* is being distributed worldwide by ZDF Enterprises.

TV movies are also registering ever-greater on-demand viewing on Mediathek.

TV EUROPE: The BBC recently announced it will cut 1,000 jobs to make up for the shortfall in its license fee revenue. The shortfall appears to be caused by an increasing number of households that do not watch live TV and do not pay the license fee. What is the situation in Germany? What is the state of ZDF's financing for the next few years?

BELLUT: Here in Germany we have a completely different situation. The license fee does not depend on actual use or on the ownership of reception devices. The age of the viewers also plays no role. In Germany a fee must be paid for every domicile, which currently comes to €17.50 per month. Companies are also obligated to contribute depending on the size of the enterprise. The financially underprivileged need not pay. The new system has proven itself successful and ensures stable financing.

TV EUROPE: ZDF Enterprises delivers significant revenue to ZDF. What does this say about the quality and relevance of ZDF's programming for the worldwide market?

BELLUT: ZDF Enterprises is highly active in the distribution of our programs at the international TV markets. The firm can cull from a wealth of high-quality and exclusive ZDF productions. Moreover, it also functions independently with great success as a license dealer, producer or co-producer, and it has opened up many new fields of business. It is not always easy to work on a global scale from a German-speaking market. ZDF Enterprises regularly positions series, event miniseries, documentaries, children's programs, TV movies and other ZDF productions with a hit factor in the international market. If ZDF is now admired around the world as a partner and supplier of programs, then that is largely due to ZDF Enterprises.

TV EUROPE: In Germany, is television still the main source of news for most people? ZDF has a very strong history of spreading news and information. How is it providing news and information in the many ways viewers want it?

BELLUT: Nowadays, everybody can get news at any time, anywhere. Fewer and fewer people are waiting until evening to find out on TV the most important news of the day. We're adjusting our position here. In our news department, we have a special unit that produces short news segments for all means of transmission, and thus it offers a continuous flow of

news. We've updated our late-night news magazine *heute nacht*. Under its new name, *heute plus*, a linear broadcast is still maintained late in the evening. However, the reports are then disseminated on the very day they are finished and discussed on social-media platforms with the audience. The production of news increasingly follows the new viewing habits. By contrast, the classical news broadcasts serve less and less often as the first contact point for news; they tend to take a more in-depth look at issues, with explanations and analysis.

TV EUROPE: Given the complexity of so many news stories these days, from ISIS to the crisis in Greece, what kind of analysis can ZDF offer viewers that commercial competitors cannot?

BELLUT: Apart from our decades-long experience, our main advantage is the professional standard of education in our news offices as well as our worldwide network of correspondents. In our main newsroom we have many offices staffed with competent editors and journalists specializing in politics, economics, science, culture, etc. In Germany only the public broadcasters can offer something like this. We prepare complex themes in documentaries and in our political and economics programs. Moreover, the audience finds comprehensive explanations and background information on our news website. News and information make up 40 percent of ZDF's total schedule. Commercial providers financed by advertising cannot even begin to think about coming close to this level of focus on news.

TV EUROPE: What impact is Netflix having on the German TV market?

BELLUT: From a medium-term perspective, the platforms supplying material on-demand anywhere in the world will no doubt have an effect on media consumption. Until now, the influence of Netflix and other commercial on-demand portals has been considerably small. The reason is that we have a very broad free-TV offering. Moreover, the programs that Netflix puts at the disposal of German audiences are still rather sparse. Netflix is currently interesting mostly to younger audiences looking for American series and feature films. Unfortunately, it was impossible to set up a national boundary-crossing broadcaster with an on-demand portal. Both the major commercial broadcasters and the pubcasters failed here due to the objection of the anti-trust authorities. This, in turn, considerably facilitates the entrance of international players into the market.

TV EUROPE: Looking ahead, what are the main challenges and opportunities facing ZDF in the next 12 to 24 months?

BELLUT: It's not our goal to be market leaders. But, I must admit, it's a great feeling to have your own programming fare so well with the audience! We'll never get tired of improving our quality. We are working continuously on various innovations, and we're testing new formats in fiction, entertainment, comedy and, obviously, news. We will continue to develop our online platform consistently, with respect to both technology and content. And we're planning to do a big relaunch of our online presence. We're concentrating above all on the expansion of our video offerings. ■