

ANNETTE DITTERT INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Rosie Goldsmith

My name's Rosie Goldsmith and it's my pleasure to introduce you to the Goethe-Institut's latest pair of DOPPELGÄNGER. It's a great way to find out about the lives and work of Germans and Britons today....

Each time we interview 2 people from the same profession in each country – someone in the UK who's worked in Germany, and a German who's worked in the same job in Britain. Our Doppelgänger in this edition are: JOURNALISTS

I'm in the ARD studio in central London with one of Germany's top TV journalists, Annette Dittert, who is based here in the UK as ARD Bureau Chief and chief correspondent. She's lived in London since 2008 and before that was ARD correspondent in Warsaw and New York. Annette was born in Cologne, studied Politics, Philosophy and German at Freiburg and Berlin. She worked in print media and began her ARD career in radio. She's received several major journalism awards and has a large online following for her witty Video-blogs about British life called 'London Calling' and for her pithy, political chat on Twitter.

Annette Dittert, welcome. Now, you've worked all over the world. How does London compare for you, personally and professionally?

Annette Dittert

Especially compared to New York where I came from when I came here almost seven years ago actually, it felt like a village after New York, like a big village, obviously, but also as something really cosy and European. And the biggest surprise was when I said that to my English colleagues is that "We are not Europe". And I had no idea! For me it felt so much more European when I came here and then I had to slowly discover that people felt everything but European here.

Rosie Goldsmith

Well, there is lots to discuss about that here. Now you've actually really taken to English life, haven't you? You've bought a houseboat on the Thames, I've heard, as well...

Annette Dittert

On the canal, it's a narrow boat. It's a very tiny little thing, but very English, yes.

Rosie Goldsmith

You don't live on the boat?

Annette Dittert

No. It's really small. You could live there, but probably not with this job, but it is a really lovely little thing that is very linked to English tradition, very linked to something I really found particular here, which is English nostalgia for the time before now, the glorious yesterday.

And I did quite a lot of films on that and it was really interesting to see, for example, all these Second World War re-enactment festivals in summer which I went to and I was surprised to find so many people being enthusiastic about playing the Nazis. Which was sort of a little shock for me, being German, coming there and suddenly a huge tank comes toward me with a *Hakenkreuz* on it and I was like "oops-la this is weird". And the British would play the Nazis and say: "Oh, it's so much fun to play the Nazis. We always die in the end, but it doesn't matter, it's so much nicer and amusing to be the bad guy!" I sort of had to understand that it was a totally innocent way of being glorious about its own past, their own past, and not something that was politically not correct – or would have been in Germany in many ways and for good reasons.

Rosie Goldsmith

I still find that very upsetting, as a journalist myself, who's worked in Germany and in Britain, that we still act like that. Do you think it's ignorance? Is it just fun for us? What do you think the reason behind that is?

Annette Dittert

I think that has to do with a big identity crisis that Britain is in at the moment. That's how I see it. That was the time when there was still this community spirit, this feeling of "This is Great Britain", this feeling of "Yes, we have something in common". Now you have immigration that is uncomparable to immigration on the continent, you have different religions, we are a post-Christian country as Rowan Williams has just acknowledged or said. It's losing its clear identity, this country. And I think that's why this nostalgia is such a strong streak.

Rosie Goldsmith

What have been the top stories for you since you've been here?

Annette Dittert

I've been through so many stories, it's really difficult to say which one was the most interesting. Europe and the whole way it seems different here from how it's seen in Germany certainly has been a very interesting story. Trying to understand where this anti-European instinct almost comes from and what it is really about is something that I'm still working on and that remains a fascinating topic, especially as almost nobody really understands on the continent why that is so strong here.

Annette Dittert

It turns around in circles. I think it has a lot to do – it's very simple and it's a cliché – with being an island and with always looking rather towards the West, towards America than towards the East. I think that has a lot to do with it. It also has to do with the media who are very focused on this nation, not doing lots of international news and especially not very much European continental news.

Rosie Goldsmith

Do you think that's one of the problems? That we in the media in the UK don't cover international issues, European issues, enough?

Annette Dittert

Yes, I do think so. I think it was something I was very surprised about when I came. As surprised as to find this country telling me "We are not Europeans", I was equally surprised to see how little international news is happening here and especially how little stories on Europe are happening. It has changed a little bit during the last years, especially due to the Euro Crisis and the crisis and all that is happening over in Europe.

Rosie Goldsmith

How do you think we in Britain now see you, the Germans?

Annette Dittert

That's interesting, because when I came seven years ago, I pretty much found the old clichés and stereotypes, Nazi jokes and all these kinds of things. And that has totally changed. It's really something I found very surprising that – I don't know when it started, two-three years ago – suddenly this kind of *Feindbild* disappeared more or less.

Rosie Goldsmith

Feindbild - this idea of Germany as the enemy?

Annette Dittert

Exactly. That has sort of vanished in a way. It had to do, I think, again, with the Euro Crisis. We've seen suddenly not some kind of Helmut Kohl – some fat German eating sausages, but Angela Merkel being very sober, dealing with the Euro Crisis, being pitied almost from here, from this side of the channel for her task. So it's suddenly changed the whole image and suddenly Germany became interesting for people here, which I found actually quite nice, living here. Suddenly whenever I said I'm from Germany I wouldn't get these same old jokes, but suddenly it was: "Oh, really? Are you from Berlin? Berlin is so cool!" That's another thing, this whole hype about Berlin has certainly also contributed to this changing of the image of Germany.

Rosie Goldsmith

You produce this video blog called *London Calling* and in it you say that you are looking at the *Eigenarten* of the Anglo-Saxons, the quirky characteristics of us, the Anglo-Saxons. What would you say these characteristics are?

Annette Dittert

Basically it is playing with the clichés, with the stereotypes. When you come here as a German journalist, you get all these kinds of questions and stories, ideas from the German desk, like: "Find an eccentric English person who has a castle that is rotting away" or something like that. So you have to somehow react to that. And what you find out when you deal with these things is that there is always a little bit of truth there, of course. I mean, compared to continental Europeans, especially to Germans, people here are more anarchic, there is a streak of eccentricism there that is interesting and sweet and very endearing. I really like living here and I love this way of "everybody can do what he or she wants". There is not this kind of pressure that everybody has to be the same, this kind of uniformity you can find in Germany. And I very much enjoy that.

Rosie Goldsmith

Now, most of my German journalist colleagues are not as interested really in Social Media, in Twitter and Facebook and online videos, as you are. I really like the way you've approached it. You have a fresh approach. Is this you as an individual or has somebody told you, ARD, to do this?

Annette Dittert

No, it's more me. I came from New York, so I was sort of familiar with this rather Anglo-American approach to Social Media that's much more active, actually. In Germany Social Media doesn't yet have the sort of same importance like here. Which also has to do, probably, with the language. If you write and read on Twitter or Facebook in English, you have much bigger world you live in, whereas in Germany you just deal with the German crowd who does it, which is less interesting. Then, of course, also because Facebook has a different standing there, I mean the Germans are much more wary about data and data protection and all these things and so they are a bit less enthusiastic about the possibilities, which is a shame.

Rosie Goldsmith

How would you describe the difference between UK and German media, from your point of view?

Annette Dittert

You have a completely different landscape regarding the tabloids and the newspapers, that's the completely different story. That was quite surprising when I came as well, because suddenly there were so many papers, compared to Germany. But then I also thought it's a lot of paper, it's all very tabloid as well, there is very few newspapers I really do read from the beginning to the end, like the Guardian, who still do really interesting stories and put research into stories, whereas, especially the tabloid press landscape is very aggressive. Sometimes it's very good as well, but it's also a lot of stories that nobody really needs, I sometimes think.

Rosie Goldsmith

Can you just tell us briefly the differences in the structure of journalism and media in Germany?

Annette Dittert

We have a system: ARD and ZDF (which is channel 2) which is in principle very similar to the BBC with one difference, which is that the whole set up is much more complicated. After the war the English, the Americans and the French decided that Germany should never again have a national broadcasting system that is just one channel and can be so easily used for propaganda. So what they did after the war was to split up the national broadcasting system into a federal system. It's very complicated. Every *Bundesland* has its own channel and they all together contribute to Channel 1, which is completely the other way round from the BBC. And which was, I think, politically a very good idea after the Second World War and there were very good reasons for doing it that way. Nowadays, so many years later, it is mostly a very complicated and very costly system and I'm not sure how long this will survive like that.

Rosie Goldsmith

The UK media have been going through very difficult times as far as regulation goes and there is a lot of discussion about transparency, accountability and trust in the media. You yourself have been on several

panel discussions here in the UK about these journalism issues. How would you assess the health of UK media today?

Annette Dittert

I think they are very healthy in many ways, because there is a lot of competition and it's always, sort of, important, it's a first step to keep something healthy. What I found very, very scary was the way the Guardian was treated by the government when they broke the Snowden story. Having a Prime Minister who was openly threatening a newspaper with stopping them from reporting in case they wouldn't listen to him was something I found deeply undemocratic and very disconcerting. And it was a story I did as such in Germany and it was seen in Germany as well as something very strange. It didn't proceed, it didn't go anywhere near that in the end, but I found the whole way the Guardian was pressured during that period of time very, very scary almost.

Rosie Goldsmith

There's been a massive examination of UK press regulation also through the Leveson inquiry. What do you think it's going to lead to in the future?

Annette Dittert

I think nothing, to be honest. I think in the best of all worlds the tabloid press will be a bit more careful about what they are doing and it has, of course, changed a little bit what Murdoch is doing in this country, but on the whole I think it won't change much, I'm afraid. On the other hand it's a big discussion whether it would be a good idea to have a press regulation through the Royal Charter, through the government in any way. I think self-regulation is the better option, but then again you would have to discuss how to do that. At the moment, from what I'm seeing, I don't have the feeling that there will be some kind of real deep change, because nobody can agree on anything, really.

Rosie Goldsmith

You spoke right at the beginning about your shock that Britain sent you when you arrived, that they didn't feel a part of Europe. We do have a big problem in this country. How would you describe the attitudes now from a journalist's point of view? What are we going to do about them in the UK? Is there something we can do?

Annette Dittert

It depends on who you talk about. I don't really feel that this anti-European sentiment is so deep, really. It's more in the media than if you talk to people on the street. It's being exploited by UKIP at the moment and it's, sort of, useful sometimes, but I don't really think that if you ever would have a proper discussion with British people in general, that this would be such a strong attitude as it is being, sort of, played out by the media and by the Tories, by the Conservative Party.

I think what Cameron is doing at this moment...what Cameron is doing with sort of announcing this referendum in the distant future is more or less just prolonging the debate and making it worse, because people don't know when this will end and it sort of keeps this debate on, although I don't find the normal person on the street so interested in this whole issue.

Rosie Goldsmith

So if you were to change one thing about Britain, what would it be, before you leave here as correspondent?

Annette Dittert

I think it would be nice to have some proper opposition to the government we have here now, that is lively and optimistic and has some real different attitudes towards Europe. And I can't really see that in Labour. I find the Labour Party really sort of wobbling back and forth not really finding their position on it. And I don't really understand why this theme "Europe", this whole topic is so left to the Lib Dems, who probably will not be here after the next general elections anymore.

Rosie Goldsmith

Annette Dittert, that was a great pleasure, thank you so much for that, it was great to talk to you...

Annette Dittert

Thanks for coming, it was a pleasure.