bobbles.tv is a privately-held pay-TV platform from bubbles media GmbH based in Hamburg, Germany. The company delivers international channel packages via the SES ASTRA satellite system and over the Internet to targeted audiences in Europe. Now bubbles media is extending its reach into the B2B space by offering pan-European platform services to broadcasters. Amy Saunders spoke with Arnold C. Kulbatzki, CEO at bubbles media, to discuss the company’s market presence, raison d’etre, and plans for the future.

Question: Can you provide an overview of the development of bobbles.tv, from its founding to where it stands today?
Arnold C. Kulbatzki: Our goal with bobbles.tv is to help expats located across Europe stay in touch with home and their culture through top quality entertainment and news from their country of origin. We aim to bring people together and make ‘home’ seem not so far away. Convenience, choice and usability for our customers are at the centre of our company values, so we combined a state of the art over the top (OTT) streaming service with direct to home (DTH) satellite reception via ASTRA at 19.2 degrees East.

We went live in August 2016, initially with programming offers for Chinese and Indonesian communities. In 2017, we launched our package of Indian TV channels. Subscribing is easy and affordable, with a flat monthly fee ranging from just euros 9.95 online to euros 19.95 on satellite.

Now we have begun to reach beyond direct consumer delivery to offer the capabilities of our proven end-to-end distribution platform to other broadcasters. Also, we are aiming to entertain even more people with bobbles.tv by offering our premium channels to cable networks and hotels across Europe.

Question: How has the combination of SES’ satellite system and MX1’s online video platform set bobbles apart in the market?
Arnold C. Kulbatzki: It has rapidly become apparent that this combination of satellite and online is a really unique and compelling offering. Certainly in Europe, if you want to truly engage with people located right across the region, pan-European satellite is the only way to go. We realised that combining OTT with DTH would yield the best of both worlds and enable us to build our business based on reach to span the continent, including areas where there is no or limited broadband. Our subscribers, and our broadcast partners, value the choice we enable.

Question: How important do you think it is for expats to be able to consume content from their home countries, and in the language of their choice?
Arnold C. Kulbatzki: We knew from
experience that people who relocate to another country still want to stay in touch, want to be part of what is happening back home. This view was validated by people in my own circle of friends who wished they could easily watch their favourite shows and movies in their mother tongue. These language-based services really help bring expat communities together. But the desire to see news and other TV entertainment in one’s own language also lies in with our new initiative to offer our attractive packages as a B2B proposition to hotels and resorts. Travellers are as interested in hearing the news from home while they are on the road as they are when in their own living rooms. Also, with increasing multiculturalism, we believe that offering our efficiently packaged entertainment delivers cable operators a differentiating offering, and a new way to attract subscribers.

Question: The broadcast market is in a major state of change right now, with OTT, 4K/UHD and virtual reality all finding their place in the sector. What is your take on these innovative technologies, and how can traditional broadcasters get on board?

Arnold C. Kulbatzki: Our OTT offering is a key part of what makes the bobbles.tv consumer offering different in the market. The pay-TV industry has changed dramatically, and even more recently, the success of Netflix has been a game-changer. For the first time, people today have widely come to use and understand words like ‘streaming’ and to adopt the vocabulary of new kinds of TV service including over-the-top. At the same time, attitudes about what makes technologies competitive or complementary are changing, and we think the bobbles story is part of that shift. People in our industry increasingly understand that satellite and OTT can work together and create a combined presence that embraces more people and engenders more business opportunities.

Generally, when it comes to technology, we are not in any hurry to rush in. This year we launched our two new Humax set-top boxes: HEVC STB for satellite reception and our new OTT box for streaming on the TV set. Chromecast is a standard feature. Typically, we take the view of ‘wait and see’, primarily because it is essential that we keep our prices as low as possible. 4K will be more widely available over time, but now, it is very far from being mass market. But our great core technology, including SES capabilities and reach, is a key reason why broadcasters are interested in leveraging our best-in-class technology platform.

Question: Can you tell us more about your platform services initiative?

Arnold C. Kulbatzki: Our OTT offering is a powerful yet highly resource-efficient way to connect with millions of viewers. For the first time, our platform is truly an all-in solution, because broadcasters can even leverage our partnership with HUMAX, whose set-top boxes we deployed this year. For many international channels, especially those wishing to reach Europe for the first time, our platform is a powerful yet highly resource-efficient way to connect with millions of viewers. They can form their own marketing strategy, with their own branding, while building their businesses in a highly resource efficient way, using tried and tested world class technology and broadcasting infrastructure. Our platform is truly an all-in solution, because broadcasters can even use our platform, which we offer to them as a white label managed service. They can form their own marketing strategy, with their own branding, while building their businesses in a highly resource efficient way, using tried and tested world class technology and broadcasting infrastructure. Our platform is truly an all-in solution, because broadcasters can even leverage our partnership with HUMAX, whose set-top boxes we deployed this year. For many international channels, especially those wishing to reach Europe for the first time, our platform is a powerful yet highly resource-efficient way to connect with millions of viewers. It appeals to international channels wishing to take the opportunity to join our multicultural consumer packages. But additionally, international broadcasters who wish to forge their own path with their own independent pay-TV businesses can also use our platform, which we offer to them as a white label managed service. We are widening our channel portfolio. Our O TT offering is a key part of what makes the bobbles.tv consumer offering different in the market. The pay-TV industry has changed dramatically, and even more recently, the success of Netflix has been a game-changer. For the first time, people today have widely come to use and understand words like ‘streaming’ and to adopt the vocabulary of new kinds of TV service including over-the-top. At the same time, attitudes about what makes technologies competitive or complementary are changing, and we think the bobbles story is part of that shift. People in our industry increasingly understand that satellite and OTT can work together and create a combined presence that embraces more people and engenders more business opportunities.

Question: What expectations do you have for bobbles.tv for 2018 and beyond?

Arnold C. Kulbatzki: 2018 will be all about expanding our reach in new ways. We are widening our channel portfolio. Right now, we are in active discussions with a major broadcasting group to put together a package of attractive programming from the Middle East. We are also very excited about new opportunities in the B2B sphere.

In addition to offering our end-to-end platform capability to broadcasters, we are reaching out to cable networks with our packages of international programming, which include premium channels, to help them engage new subscribers.

Additionally, we are exploring the B2B opportunities with major hotel networks. We know that the hotel and travel markets are fiercely competitive, and hotels continually look for new ways to enhance the guest experience. With our packaged channel line-ups of quality popular entertainment, hotels and resorts in Europe have the opportunity to very cost efficiently deliver attractive TV services via satellite to thousands of rooms for their international guests. Hotel chains can offer engaging premium content to the growing numbers of people from Asia who visit Europe, for example, and they can do so far more economically than possible with alternative offerings in the hospitality space.

We are excited to build on our ongoing consumer bobbles.tv offering, to keep widening our channel diversity, while in parallel making our unique content offerings and transmission capabilities available to other businesses.