

# Ruud Hendriks

Founder, Startupbootcamp/Innoleaps



## Building an empire based on rebellion:

**Ruud Hendriks talks to Jane Wakefield about how, as a rebel pirate radio DJ, he was caught with his pants down, how he went on to build a media empire and is now putting entrepreneurs through one of the world's most successful Boot Camps.**

Ruud Hendriks is a man who, by his own admission, had achieved everything he wanted to in the media industry by the time of his 50th birthday.

He had anchored numerous Dutch TV programs, introduced the first rolling news radio format in the Netherlands and guided the Dutch production company Endemol, famous for bringing the world reality TV show Big Brother and the quiz show Deal or No Deal, through international expansion.

That's a lot to fit under any belt and Ruud was ripe for a new challenge.

"I had done everything from editing, directing, presenting programmes all the way to producing and selling them and then broadcasting them. I thought I am 50, I have a network, financial means and I still have the energy so if there are any moments at which I could decide to do something completely different, then this is it."

In deciding what came next, he looked back to one of the first things he had worked on.

"I've always been a bit of an entrepreneur in the sense that before I started my legal career in broadcasting I used to own a pirate radio station. I didn't have the faintest idea how I could get hold of the amount of money I needed to launch it but I've always loved starting new projects."

So it seems fitting that the project he started shortly after his 50th birthday party was one to help entrepreneurs get funding and achieve success.

Startupbootcamp is now the largest start-up accelerator in Europe and number

four globally. And its success means he has added two new businesses to his portfolio – Innoleaps, founded in 2014, which brings the concept of a start-up incubation to the corporate world by helping firms set up new ventures, and The Talent Institute, which finds and hires out "talented, bright people" between the age of 25 and 35.

Not bad for a project grown out of a mid-life crisis. But clearly the learnings from a distinguished career in the media industry have helped shape its success.

"The main reason that start-ups fail is that they solve problems that do not exist. We can easily solve that because we find out pretty early and then they make a pivot and move into another direction or to another business model," he explains.

The second reason start-ups fail, he tells me, is because of problems within the team.

There are lots of reasons why the hard-working, pressured environment of a start-up can cause arguments among the founding team.

"Perhaps one of them becomes a parent and can't spend the same time on the company as they did," he says.

And Startupbootcamp approaches the issue as a marriage counsellor might.

"We make certain that those team quarrels are solved before they even exist by doing pre-mediation. We have professional mediators who sit down

with the start-up founders on a monthly basis and find out what irritates them and discusses it."

As a result, 70% of Startupbootcamp's firms survive beyond four years, he says proudly.

"That's exceptional and I consider pre-mediation to be the main reason for that," Ruud tells me.

His media career spanned four decades. He started as a DJ at Radio Mi Amigo, became a radio and TV reporter at Veronica, rising to senior editor and head of current affairs, founding RTL Nederland before spending seven years at Endemol.

But as a young man with a love of DJ-ing, he found the perfect job for an 18 year-old self-confessed rebel with a job in the North Sea onboard the ship that brought the world the pirate radio station Radio Caroline.

"I have always been a bit of a rebel in testing the waters and seeing how far certain things can go. I'm

not too fond of authority," he tells me, and of course he faced the full force of the law when he was involved in Radio Caroline.

"Early in 1978 sometime in April, we were all standing on the deck and this DTI boat came up to us within five or six metres and once these guys got closer, we all turned around and we dropped our pants."

***We were followed pretty closely by the Department of Trade and Industry and I remember that they used to send out boats to watch us and sometimes these boats would come pretty close."***

# Leaders Lives

That mooning incident literally came back to bite him on the bum when he went “legal”. “Two years later I was working for legal public broadcasting in the Netherlands and I did a report on pirate radio. And I had to do an interview with the man responsible within the Dutch Justice department. So I walked into his office and introduced myself and he asked me about being a DJ onboard Radio Caroline and said he had some interesting pictures of me with my pants down.”

He tells the anecdote with a huge smile on his face and clearly has incredibly fond memories of his time at Radio Caroline.

Working in such an unconventional workplace – he could be onboard on for 10 to 12 weeks at a time – taught him valuable life lessons.

“I learned to pick and choose my battles because when you’re on a ship that is two metres long you have to learn what to argue about. You learn a lot about people too.”

He learned more about people when Radio Caroline was taken off air for a time and he replied to an ad in an Amsterdam newspaper for a DJ in a club in the city’s Red Light District.

“It was a Swingers’ club. Couples came in, they undressed and they had sex in one huge space. And from 8pm to 1pm at night I was spinning records for them.”

“If you watch, literally 30, 40, 50 people having sex with each other three days a week and you are just sitting there in blue jeans and a T-shirt, it doesn’t mean a lot to you, it just becomes another job.”

The rebelliousness and

broadmindedness that he had cultivated as a young man fed into his business plan for commercial radio in the Netherlands, which he launched when he became a co-founder of Sky Radio in the late 1980s, when it was majority-owned by Rupert Murdoch.

“We were beaming programming in from the UK into the Netherlands like radio Caroline was beaming from the North Sea into the UK.” He tells me.

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**“Launching commercial radio and TV into the Netherlands was rebellious. And we really had to find a loophole in the law to do that. And now with our start-ups every now and then we encounter some rebels. The nicest flowers grow at the edge of a cliff so sometimes you have to go and collect them.”**

“When that worked I thought, hey, maybe we can do the same with TV and we launched RTL from Luxembourg and created the number one commercial TV station.”

In doing so he had to face up to the Dutch government which wanted to block the

enterprise and fought numerous court cases in order to expand programming.

He recalls a start-up he helped called Tom’s Cabin, which was a second-hand marketplace for e-books. I imagine that a part of him was attracted to the start-up because it was pushing the boundaries of legality.

Publishers weren’t impressed with the firm, and the case went to the European court of law.

“We lost that case.” He recalls, again with a wry smile.

In an incredibly varied career, Ruud became president of NBC Europe and transformed Superchannel into NBC and finally into CNBC Europe.

He joined the TV production company Endemol as an executive board member in 1994.

When he joined, it operated in three countries which expanded to 21 by the time he left in 2001. Its market value had grown from



135 million to 5.3 billion euros.

The phenomenal success of Endemol was, in part down to an innovative and entrepreneurial business model.

“We had a number of TV formats that we offered exclusively to entrepreneurs who already own their own company. We bought 49% of the company, we provided them with our portfolio so that they could easily grow their companies.”

“Then we would acquire another 2% a few years later and then another two years later and then after five years, we would acquire them.”

He guided the firm through its IPO and acquisition by Telefonica in 2001 and he took the financial model he had cultivated at Endemol to Startupbootcamp.

“We built it like a TV production company but instead of producing TV programmes, we produce companies.”

I ask him if, as a media professional, he is particularly happy to help start-ups in that industry. His answer surprises me.

“I don’t consider the idea

to be important at all. This is all about the team. A great idea will be destroyed by a weak idea. The execution is way more important than the idea in itself.”

The areas that do interest him are Fintech – and he is a fan of Bitcoin – and Artificial Intelligence.

“I think AI will revolutionise the world in an unbelievable

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**“We created a program that we’ve been doing for the last six or seven years. We get people together, either junior first-time managers, or more senior managers, and we have 800 to 1,000 people together for two or three days.”**

way. AI is literally now in all our lives and I think you will see in the next three to six months spectacular things will happen.

But he warns that the media industry could be “sleeping” through this tech revolution, with the winners being the ones prepared to use tech tools, such as AI.

“I’m a host of a podcast and the editing of it is done in a few minutes and is fully automated with AI technology.”

It comes as no surprise that Ruud is still involved in broadcasting because it was his first love.

He tells me he became a journalist because he was “a very curious person”.

# Leaders Lives

"News has always been a passion. I get up very early in the morning and I still have subscriptions to eight newspapers and I still read the New York Times when I wake up."

"I know I sound like a grumpy old man but I sometimes miss that curiosity with young people I was always curious and asking things like how can we break a media monopoly?"

The fact young people are increasingly getting their news from social media rather than the traditional publishers, also concerns him.

He also worries about the downsides of AI—in particular, its ability to create fake news.

"When I used to be onboard Radio Caroline, I used to love to watch the news with Anna Ford and Angela Rippon. But nowadays you can recreate them and you can feed them today's news and they can read it artificially, without anybody noticing that they are not real."

The threats and the risk of misinformation is "one of the



***You run the risk with social media that you end up in a limited bubble and you don't get any outside views anymore.***

of another well-known rebel, Elon Musk.

"I love the things that Elon Musk has created. I love the car, I think it's great. I made a lot of money on it as well because when I bought the car, I also invested the same amount of money I paid for the car in Tesla shares."

It is clear that Ruud is a very shrewd businessman



***That is over 40 years ago or me, but I'm still a rebel.***

but life now is led at a lightly less hectic pace. He spends around three-quarters of his time in Ibiza in a rural area without any mobile or 4G reception, so is also a fan of Musk's venture into satellite broadband with his firm, Starlink. He has a dish on his rooftop, which means he is able to stay connected to the rest of the world – a suitably elliptical journey for a man

worst problems of our time," he thinks.

"I think we need to tell young kids at the earliest possible age about the dangers of misinformation and how you can check facts."

It comes as no surprise that Ruud is a big fan

who has beamed media around the world.

Starlink is part of SpaceX but Musk's latest dream—to set up a colony on Mars—might be a step too far for Ruud at the age of 64.

"My health doesn't allow me to go on a trip to Mars

but I would immediately do that if it was possible," he tells me.

Despite physical constraints, he still retains the spirit he had as an 18-year-old onboard Radio Caroline.

## ***What are your top three tips for a successful business?***

- *Just do it. Too many people don't dare to start. Fifty reasons not to do it but, if you really want to build a business you should just do it.*
- *Validate your riskiest assumptions whenever possible. Don't just decide based on your experience but, build on data and interact.*
- *Reflect at least once a year if your current role still fits you. Running a company with 100 employees is very different from a start-up with just a few collaborators.*

## ***How do you relax?***

*By lots of reading, walking and dancing.*

## ***Tell me something surprising about you!***

*I'm a pretty good house music DJ. I love to play minimal, progressive and techno. And few people know I once DJ'd a few months in a brothel and swingers club.*

## ***What piece of tech, other than your phone, could you not be without?***

*I love my Starlink Disk in Ibiza and my Tesla Model S in Amsterdam but the piece I really love is my Pioneer DJM 900 NEXUS DJ mixer.*