



OIRT – EBU

David Wood, Multimedia Development Manager, EBU



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The raising of the Iron Curtain: ten years on.

In 1989 the Iron Curtain was raised and, on 1 January 1993, the two broadcasting unions – the EBU and the OIRT – merged.

Ten years later, have we achieved what we hoped from the merger in one of the most active areas for both unions: new technology?

Today's media world is a far cry from the 'plain-vanilla' radio and TV of 1992. If someone said you had a website, you'd use a ceiling brush to clean it. Life, and our media systems, were simpler.

Today, predicts the European Commission, more than half of Europe's entire e-mail traffic will be 'junk mail' before the end of 2003. If this is the Information Society, please Lord, grant us a digital divide.

Today, you have 'WiFi' access for your PC... that even works on some of Europe's beaches. I want the video clips and the e-mail, but I'm scared to sunbathe with my wife on the beach because some muscular Romeo will kick sand on my keyboard.

All that was a million miles away in 1992.

At that time, for the technical community, the Iron Curtain was something that existed without reason. You just had to live with it.

In H.G. Wells's novel from the early 1930s, *The Shape of Things to Come*, the politicians eventually bring destruction on the world and the engineers take over. Unselfish, full of practical logic and good sense, the world prospers under their leadership. Clearly, Wells had never met any engineers.

In the years before the merger, the EBU and OIRT technical communities felt a certain distance from politics, and had a common purpose that Wells might recognize.

The 1970s and 1980s were incredibly active for broadcasting technology – and broadcasters themselves led the world. So much of lasting value was achieved. There was cooperation and camaraderie between the EBU and OIRT Technical Committees.

In those days there were three large centres of excellence in broadcast research in the East – Member's labs in Prague, Berlin, and Moscow. In the West, Members' had labs in Kingswood, Winchester, Madrid, Munich, Darmstadt, Rennes and Turin. There were also smaller development groups within many of the EBU and OIRT Members.

There was formidable technical strength for innovation. Since then, the accountants have eliminated many of these laboratories. Though possibly justified, it's always easy short-term management to hope someone else will do the research for you.

Before the merger there were contextual differences for the EBU and OIRT engineers.

Western engineers had no problems in obtaining any kind of electronic components or test equipment. If you had an idea, you just could build it and test it. A philosopher would say we could work 'empirically'.

For engineers from the East, obtaining much of this material was impossible because it was not made in their countries and you needed hard currency to buy it. Sometimes there were also political barriers on certain imported goods. So the engineers

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The Moscow Group in 1989 examining how close HDTV is to reality. Second from the right: Valery Khleborodov, who led the team of Soviet researchers



Last meeting of the OIRT Technical Committee, Helsinki, April 1992, from left to right: Jerzy Rutkowski, Anatoli Kachel, Vlastislav Svoboda, Gabor Heckenast, Viktor Dementjev, Henrikas Yushkiavitshus, Gerhard Steinke

from the East often had to work on paper alone, and consequently were great theoreticians. In the blink of an eye, a page could be filled with equations. Philosophers might call these engineers ‘rationalists’.

Actually, you need both approaches to make things work and colleagues from the East were envious of our options in the West. But whether or not they were able to implement new media technology, they understood it technically – as well or even better than we did – and contributed to technical arguments.

For folks like us, life was (and is) measured in terms of people, meetings and agreements. A number of these spring to mind.

OIRT had a critical meeting of its Technical Committee, which was held in Miscole-Tapolka near Lake Balaton (Hungary) in 1981. During this meeting the two unions started to work on an agreement on the digital television standard, technically called ‘422’. This is used throughout the world today for digital programme production and broadcasting. It is a lasting legacy of that meeting and a tribute to those who worked to reach the agreement.

Before that, the television world was, loosely, split into three international

camps because of a number of technicalities, two of which were ‘picture rate’, and the ‘colour system’. The reasons and justifications for the differences are obscure and lost in the mists of time. One day they will be in a *Lord of the Rings* episode.

The 422 system agreed in Balaton was a ‘compromise in convenience’ that best satisfied these three camps. It was an ‘equal gain’ or ‘equal misery’ solution – as international agreements often have to be.

There were many other agreements, and life was not always straightforward.

Four years later we were locked in a different standards debate: high-definition television (HDTV). The US was not prepared to compromise and proposed a set of technical parameters developed in Japan which also suited them. EBU Members were split about whether to agree to the US proposal or not. The debate continued at a meeting of the ITU (International Telecommunication Union) in 1986 in Dubrovnik. The EBU itself could only remain silent. OIRT Members pointed out that accepting the US proposal would mean 75% of the world would be not only be inconvenienced but would pay more than the other richer 25%. The proposal was not accepted. Fair indeed, but if only there had been some compromise the progress of high-definition television would certainly have been faster.

In 1988, the EBU/OIRT Moscow Group was created to help smooth the path to HDTV, and to establish how close the HDTV picture quality was to the ‘real thing’. We did a series of psycho-physical tests in Moscow.

At one stage, the results were baffling. The psycho-physical tests showed the picture quality of high-definition television was better than the ‘real thing’. We tracked it down to the problem of ‘beauty’. Assessors

preferred the HDTV version of a girl’s face because the TV camera had removed the natural skin blemishes. “Vanity, thy name is woman” (at least according to Shakespeare).

The people

Prior to the merger there were many characters and personalities in the EBU and OIRT.

A jewel in the OIRT crown was surely Ruzena Jezkova, who managed the OIRT Technical Department based in Prague. She had an encyclopaedic knowledge of broadcast technology, and could always gently steer a meeting to an agreement.

Henrikas Juskavitsus was the director of the OIRT Technical Department from 1966 to 1972, before moving on to the heights of broadcast management in the Soviet Union and then UNESCO. Meetings with Henrikas were a delight. “Mr Chairman, I am pessimistic. A pessimist is an optimist who knows the facts.” This type of comment from him was typical.

Rudi Gressman was the EBU’s technical director from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s – a true gentleman from the old school who always made his point sensitively and convincingly.

I can’t mention all the many others, but they know who they are, and what they did. They may hopefully forgive omissions in a short article.

The merger

When it came to deciding how to shape the merged Union, we found that there was a large area of overlap in the studies of production and delivery technology between the two unions. In many cases, an existing EBU group covered the ground, and we were able to simply enlarge it with members from the former OIRT broadcasters.

But there were two specific areas that were new to the EBU.

The first was the activity of ‘listening to radio content’. The OIRT had a group of audiophiles who would appraise the overall quality of radio material. In the EBU our audio tests were only seconds in length, to test if any distortions were present. In the OIRT they examined and listened carefully to the whole programme to gain an overall impression of the ‘goodness’. This was a fine idea and the work carried over into the new EBU for many years, migrating to listening studies in 5.1 multichannel sound. The work continues but is arguably not so active today – and this is probably our loss. Really high quality audio is now available to the public via new disc formats – and broadcasters will have to compete for the ears of the public.

The second area concerned ‘terminology’. The OIRT was



extremely thorough in defining technical terms and in providing translations in different languages. We had grown lax in the EBU. By 1992, English had become the technical Esperanto for all those who took part in the work of the Technical Committee. Probably most EBU Members' engineers could not ask a girl for a date in English (French is better for this anyway), but they were all able to discuss the technicalities of recursive filters in English.

The terminology work of the OIRT carried over into the new structure and was of great value. This work is not so active today, but we might suspect that the use of technical English now covers the world even more than it did ten years ago.

OIRT's needs

In 1993 we asked the ex-OIRT Members what they needed most

from the EBU Technical Committee to participate in a modern pluralist democratic media environment. At the EBU we thought the answer would be 'management skills'. We thought we needed to help them to become more efficient by organizing training courses in management.

Our OIRT colleagues wisely thought otherwise. They wanted only one thing – as much information about technology as we could give. The rest they could do for themselves. They thought the main problem with management training was that it would not be given to the right people. Modern management methods would only be implemented if those at the top of the organization introduced them – but these were the same people who considered themselves too busy to attend management courses. In our hearts we suspect this was a wise judgement: good management is the result of the evolution of people

at the top rather than an overnight phenomena.

The transition was achieved very smoothly, and the OIRT's documents were transferred to Geneva. It was a time of sadness because an age had come to an end but it was also one of optimism. A new larger EBU, strengthened by the OIRT members, would be able to make even more important contributions to new technology. This has happened.

By the time of the merger, the OIRT had come a long way. Vaclav Kolar, Czech Television, wrote about the beginning of the OIRT in the 1950s: "It is proper to remind ourselves that at that time the reception of information from the West was, on the whole, considered to be an unwanted intrusion of foreign ideology into the social consciousness, and was assessed as a serious breach of the moral codes of the society at that time."

Time has mellowed attitudes, and in the closing moments of the OIRT in 1992, Bujor Ionita from Romanian Television wrote an overall view of the OIRT age: “Uniting the Pleasant to the Useful, and profiting from the experience of others, everyone was able to solve at least part of their problems, to come to solutions, and to find the way to proceed.”

Ten years later, this statement is even truer today.

OIRT

The first international radio organization was established in Brussels in the 1920s. In 1949 countries from the West withdrew from it because of the Cold War, and in 1950 formed a separate body, the EBU. Countries from Eastern Europe remained in the OIR(T) and Prague became the Technical Department's headquarters in the Eastern bloc. The two unions worked separately until 1993 when they merged.

Members of the OIRT Technical Committee

*Kari Ilmonen, YLE
Valentin Chlebnikov, Ostenkino
Vaclav Kolar, CTV
Nicolae Stanciu, RTV
Miron Szydowski, PTV
Laslo Vozak, HTV
Yuri Krylov, Director of OIRT
Technical Department
Ruzena Jezkova, Head of OIRT
Secretariat*

David Wood was distinguished, among others, with an OIRT medal from the OIRT Technical Committee for help in achieving the merger of the Technical Committees.



Henrikas Yushkiavitshus, UNESCO Deputy Director General and former Director of the OIRT Technical Department



Ruzena Jezkova, Head of Secretariat OIRT Technical Department and Rudi Gressman, EBU Technical Director in 1981



Kari Ilmonen, the last Chairman of the OIRT Technical Committee