EBU archives

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Behind the scenes

The EBU is used to working mostly behind the scenes, providing the international structures through which national broadcasters operate. And this is also where it finds its place in most of the written broadcasting works, which tend to be told from the perspective of national broadcasters.

Broadcasting is one of the many vital infrastructures, such as roads, railways and powerlines, that linked Europe long before there was any sort of formal political unity in Europe.

A project currently underway at the Eindhoven University of Technology in the Netherlands now aims to bring these systems to the fore to tell a technological history of Europe. Seen from this perspective, the EBU no longer stands in the background, but rather takes centre stage as one of the most important actors in shaping the broadcasting infrastructures that most people in Europe take for granted.

The EBU archives contain a wide variety of information that is of interest to historians who study Europe from many different perspectives. Documents of all sorts, from the IBU, OIRT and of course EBU, from the entire period ranging from 1925 up to the present can be found here: publications, minutes of the secretary general and all the various working groups and committees, statutes and statistics, not to mention photos and press releases. For historians of broadcasting the documents are of clear value, showing that from its very beginnings radio was considered an instrument that would go far beyond national borders.

Everybody who works at the EBU probably knows that international broadcasting in Europe has a long tradition. In past issues of Diffusion and in anniversary booklets an outline history has been told that stretches back to the earliest days of radio in Europe and to the foundation of the International Broadcasting Union in 1925. What far fewer people know – and this includes historians – is that much of this history remains preserved in the archives of the EBU.

The present EBU sits literally on top of a treasure trove of historical documents: in the basement of the EBU headquarters in Geneva. Armi Heikkinen looks after materials not only from the European Broadcasting Union, but also of the founding organization, the International Broadcasting Union (IBU) and of its Eastern European counterpart, during the Cold War period, the International Organisation for Radio and Television (OIRT). These documents not only tell the institutional history of the EBU, but give insight into the broader history of Europe itself.
A mine

This international cooperation in the field of broadcasting cannot be fully grasped from the materials in the national broadcasting archives. Cultural historians will find a wide variety and detailed information on one of EBU’s primary tasks, the activities of coordinating the programme exchanges between the various member organizations. The wealth of audience research is relevant for social historians, while political historians will find materials that will allow them to trace the tensions between public broadcasting and governments on an international level.

Historians of technology can follow the complicated processes by which broadcasting infrastructures have been developed and the often difficult negotiations necessary for making various national systems compatible. Combining these various approaches allows us to gain a picture of the many ways in which the international dimension of broadcasting has shaped the daily lives of those in Europe and beyond.

For our work in Eindhoven, the EBU archives offer answers to our questions about the role of technology in shaping European history. To what extent is the broadcasting infrastructure in Europe ‘European’? That is to say, what ideas of Europe – if any – have been influential in creating the international broadcasting systems?

The documents in the EBU’s archives allow us to look not only at the technological networks, but at the personal networks that have developed through the EBU. They lead us to the early meetings in resorts such as Biarritz and Torquay, where the ‘gentlemen’s club’ of broadcasters met and maintained contact over many years. They show us articles in the Technical Review and minutes of meetings, where engineers from Eastern and Western blocs met and exchanged expertise in spite of the ‘iron curtain’ that theoretically divided them. We find a community of technicians who have maintained daily contact over years across the whole of the European Broadcasting Area by means of a basic four-wire connection. Of course, the archives also reveal tensions as well as cooperation in European infrastructure building, just as we can find in all of the infrastructures we study, some of which were dissolved and some of which continue to this day.

Memory

Public service broadcasting not only brings people together in the present, it also records and maintains a collective history, of which broadcasters themselves are integral parts. By keeping archives that are available not only to its own staff and members but also to historical researchers, the EBU performs an important public service that goes beyond broadcasting. Greater and greater numbers of historians are coming to realize that broadcasting is
a crucial part of the story of our times, a story that goes well beyond national borders. Archives such as the EBU’s will allow us to begin to tell that story from a genuinely European perspective.

* Dr. Alexander Badenoch has a background in modern languages and anthropology and is a specialist in broadcasting history. His current work explores questions of European identity expressed through technological networks in the 20th Century.

Suzanne Lommers is a PhD candidate with a background in economic history. She is currently working on a project “Europe in the Airwaves” which intends to examine the relationship between European broadcasting infrastructures and the history of European ideas.