

## ‘ON THE ROAD AGAIN’

### AN EXPERIMENTAL MEDIA ARCHAEOLOGY JOURNEY TO THE ORIGINS OF TRANSNATIONAL TELEVISION IN EUROPE

Andreas Fickers<sup>1</sup>

Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History  
University of Luxembourg  
Maison des Sciences Humaines  
11, Porte des Sciences  
L - 4366 Esch-Belval  
[andreas.fickers@uni.lu](mailto:andreas.fickers@uni.lu)

Andy ‘O Dwyer<sup>2</sup>

Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History  
University of Luxembourg  
Maison des Sciences Humaines  
11, Porte des Sciences  
L - 4366 Esch-Belval  
[andy.odwyer@uni.lu](mailto:andy.odwyer@uni.lu)

Alexandre Germain<sup>3</sup>

University of Luxembourg  
Multimedia Production Unit  
Faculty of Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities  
11, Porte des Sciences  
L - 4366 Esch-Belval  
[alexandre.germain@uni.lu](mailto:alexandre.germain@uni.lu)

**Abstract:** This video documents the authors’ journey back to the origins of transnational television in Europe. Inspired by the idea of experimental media archaeology (EMA), the trip to original locations of the transnational media event known as ‘Paris-week’ in 1952 illustrates a new approach to media historiography, which aims to sensitize television historians for the material remains, topography and physical spaces of early television transmissions. Readers /viewers are invited to watch the different episodes of the authors’ journey by clicking on the figures.

**Keywords:** television history, transnational television, ‘Paris Week’, Eurovision, experimental media archaeology.

1 Author, in charge of the storyboard.

2 Author, in charge of production.

3 In charge of production. We also would like to thank Tim van der Heijden for his support.

## 1 Introduction

In December 2017 we embarked on a media archaeology field trip, inspired by the idea to see whether we could find any remains of an historic event of European television history, which took place some 65 years ago. The so-called 'Paris week' of 1952 was the first major transnational television event in European history. With this media archaeological field trip, we aimed at investigating or retracing both the physical remains and the local memories of this event. Equipped with a laptop and a rich collection of digitized sources (texts, photos, films) collected from archives in France and Britain, we visited Lille, Cassel, Calais and Dover on the 21<sup>st</sup> and 22 of December 2017...

## 2 Birth of Transnational Television

The 'Paris Week' was celebrated as both a political symbol of Franco-British post-war collaboration - the badge of a new 'entente cordiale'. Already in 1950, television signals crossed for the first time the Channel, celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the laying of the first telegraph cable between France and Britain in 1850. Both the Calais experiment and the Paris Week were a powerful technical demonstration of the possibility of doing transnational television at a time when most of the European countries not even had inaugurated national services.

## 3 Challenge of TV Infrastructures

Because of the different television standards in Europe, doing transnational television transmissions was a technical challenge for television engineers and technical staff. In addition, a relay chain linking Paris to London using the natural terrain (height), transmitters on buildings such as the casino in Cassel and temporary transmitters was necessary in order to transport the television signals from Paris to London and up to Scotland. The successful transmission and standards conversion were important tests for the transmission of the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953 and the birth of Eurovision in 1954.



Figure 1. Andy O'Dwyer using original film material of 1952 (copied to a laptop) in order to identify the filmed locations in the town of Cassel/France.

A. Fickers, A. 'O Dwyer and A. Germain, 'On The Road Again'

36 TELEVISION RADIO TIMES August 21, 1950

**First Television Programme from the Other Side of the Channel**

## Calais en Fête

On Sunday evening BBC Television reaches out from the land across the sea for the first programme to be received direct from the Continent. Here CECIL MCGIVERN tells viewers about the programme, and a BBC engineer describes how the signals will be brought across the Channel to Alexandra Palace and Sutton Coldfield. Children's Hour visits Calais on Wednesday at 5.40 p.m.

*An engineer adjusting the receiving aerial in the hills of Dover* *The Hotel de Ville in Calais—scene of Sunday's programme*

I HAVE just sat down at my desk after switching off the television set in my office. For several hours we have been viewing the pictures on the screen. As seven o'clock it was black. Then light flicked across it, then turned to blackness again. We knew that our outside broadcast engineers in Calais had switched on their gear, that cameras were alive, that pictures were straggling to reach us in Alexandra Palace. No one was sure if they would come. Then, slowly, a picture formed. It was l'Hotel de Ville, the Town Hall of Calais. The picture settled. The building became clear. The camera panned slowly to the tower in the clock face. Twenty-five to seven over time a bomb had blown out most of the ornamental face and had killed the machinery. But all thoughts of the suffering of Calais were pushed into the background by the excitement of this moment. We in London could see a clock in Calais—and more clearly than we had hoped. The camera panned across the square. A general dove stopped and started. The lens swung was swung and there was his face in close-up, somewhat half smiling, very French.

The first test had succeeded. We could with some confidence rely on a transmission from Calais on Sunday, August 27. That, however, was not enough. We wanted a night-time programme. We wanted to see Calais at five. l'Hotel de Ville, the floodlit, the square filled with dancing people, the torchlight procession, the children at the fair. Would the camera be able to send us a satisfactory night-time picture? We switched off and waited until dawn.

**The Anxious Moment**

At nine o'clock the screen flickered again. This was the anxious moment. Suddenly the shimmering sunny light faded and there, clear against the dark sky, was the floodlit tower. The camera moved and searched, making out here a crowd there in the distance the local bus. A group of television officials and engineers came into view, cooing some bewildered (for rain was now pouring down) very wet citizens into a rough procession, handing them torches, walking them across the glimmering square past the camera. We watched until we were satisfied that, barring accidents, it was reasonable to expect that on Monday on Sunday, August 27, English men and women and children, sitting in their homes in London and in Birmingham, in villages and in valleys, could watch the men and women and children of Calais talking to them, singing to them, dancing for them.

Let us be clear about this. You will not see Calais like this any weekend. Calais is half in ruins. Calais is slowly trying to raise itself above the devastation of war, but Calais for this one night is forgetting its immediate past. Not just because that in the creature of the first message sent by submarine cable from Dover to Calais. Not only because British television cameras are there for the first time. The real reason goes deep into emotion and far back into history. Perhaps you will not see it on August 27, but in the gardens fronting the Town Hall is the Bodin group of the Burghers of Calais, the statue of the story which every English and French child knows. Go to l'Hotel de Ville and they will smilingly show you the stained glass window depicting the scene when, long, long ago, English soldiers were driven out of Calais and not forbidden to France. Then they will take you outside and show you the ruin of the buildings where, centuries later, in 1940, the Germans made their last stand.

Accidents can happen. On Sunday, August 27, the pictures might not be as good as we would like. They might come. But if they do come, then think as you watch the French face, as you hear the French voices of what there is in this moment. In the floodlit square will be television, the new world. In the shadows beyond will be stirring the emotions that men felt one hundred years ago when a message passed along a ribbon-covered cable laid slowly and painfully on the bed of the sea in the thoughts of the Guards lighting their way back to England, the history of centuries. Even if the best planned because only the glimpse of a moment, it will still be a great moment.

HOW have the engineers turned the possibility of cross-channel television broadcast into reality? The answer lies mainly in recent developments that have taken place in portable television radio links. Previously, the working range for the outside-broadcast units was little more than twenty-five miles. Moreover, the transmitting equipment was bulky, and two large lorries were needed to carry it. The new portable radio links produced by the British radio industry have altered all this. Being light and compact, they can be set up readily wherever a good position offers itself. And perhaps of even greater value is the fact that several of them can be used in tandem to transmit the picture signals from point to point in a series of hops.

For the Calais broadcast the BBC engineers have set up five temporary radio-link stations along the 95-mile route to London. The first is, of course, at Calais, where a micro-wave transmitter has been installed in the tower of the Town Hall, 200 feet high. Three micro-wave links work on wavelengths of a few centimetres and concentrate the radio energy into sharp beams in much the same way as searchlights produce narrow and intense beams of light. The idea is to direct as much as possible of the energy towards the receiving point and so increase the strength of the signal picked up there.

The second station is on one of the towers of the Air Ministry radar station high above Dover. The stretch from Calais to Dover is the most hazardous part of the transmission path to London, because weather, tides, and even airplanes in the Straits set play tricks with the picture signals on their way across. From Dover another micro-wave link will carry the signals on to Warren Street, near Leamham where the equipment has been installed on top of the Mid-Kent Water Company's tower. The next stage is to Harwell, a distance of eighty miles. From Harwell the signals will cover the last bit of their journey to London, where the receiving equipment has been set up on the 200-foot-high London University Senate House in Bloomsbury. From the Senate House they will go by cable to Broadcasting House in Alexandra Palace, and by the G.P.O. radio link to Sutton Coldfield.

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Figure 2. Announcement of the "Calais-Experiment" (25<sup>th</sup> of August 1950) – the first television transmission from France to Great Britain crossing the Channel. Source: Radio Times.



Figure 3. Artistic map of the "Paris Week" (July 1952) showing the relay links for the live transmission of television pictures from Paris to England and Scotland. Source: Radio Times.

## 4 Paris Week

Despite some financial and technical hurdles, the Heads of BBC and RTF, William Haley and Waldimir Porché, decided in July 1951 to stage the so-called 'Paris Week' in July 1952. During several meetings of the Liaison Committee in London and Paris, all technical, organisational and programme related issues were discussed in detail. Jean d'Arcy even arranged a meeting between Richard Dimpleby and Etienne Lalou (see figure 4), the two elected presenters of the Paris Week, in order to harmonise their prepared commentaries. Starting with an opening broadcast from the British Embassy in Paris on the evening of the 8th of July, a total of 17 programmes were realized within a week - a tremendous effort and enormous technical challenge for both the French and the British staff involved.

## 5 European Techno Diplomacy

The post-war European television landscape was characterised by a nationalistic techno-political battle over black and white television line standards. This post-war line standard debate must be interpreted as a techno-nationalist conflict of technical, symbolic and economic dimensions. Because of its network structure, the definition of a line standard had direct impact on the technical parameters and characteristics of all production, transmission and reception technologies of television as a large technological system: a case of techno-diplomacy in an emerging regulatory regime for transnational television in Europe.

## 6 Lessons Learnt

The experimental media archaeology journey (physically visiting the sites) brought a new layer of knowledge that could not be realised in any other way. Observing the topography (landscape) to see the chosen sights, Cassel, the towers of both Lille and Calais and Dover as 'high-points' to take the pictures from Paris to London made us aware of the fragility and - to a certain degree - ephemerality of television infrastructures. Most of the physical constructions (transmitters) have disappeared, and even buildings that hosted important equipment (such as the Casino in Cassel, where the line conversion was realised) disappeared or show no more sign of the former activities (such as the clock tower in Lille which hosted the first regional television studio in France). There seems to be little awareness for the material heritage of a technology that was once praised as most revolutionary invention in human history... Finally, one of the most exciting results of this experiment were the encounters with people on-site; their memories, also their astonishment to see two middle-aged men wandering around with a Laptop in order to identify places that were recorded on film some 65 years ago, made us aware of the important role that television has as a technology of memory. As such, the confrontation of the locals with the archival traces of the 'Paris Week' produced an interesting moment of communicative memory production, bringing two distinct or parallel traditions of the same event into contact with each other. As the locals had never seen the BBC documentary nor any other filmic sources covering the event, our media archaeological experiment has - in a certain way - broken down the transnational and European dimension of the event to the local level; and, the other way around, enriched the transnational story by local memories and knowledge. In this way, the idea of EMA - that it so sensitise the historian for the materiality and performativity of old media technologies and to reflect on the sensorial and social dimension of doing media history in a hands-on and re-enactment approach - has without doubt proven its intellectual and performative usefulness in this EMA-journey.

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Figure 4. The two main presenters of the Paris Week on top of the Eiffel Tower: on the left the French speaker Etienne Lalou (RTF); on the right: Richard Dimbleby (BBC). Source: BBC archives.



Figure 5. The BBC opening show of Television Centre on Wednesday 29th June 1960. Among the guests were Cecil McGivern (left) and Jean d'Arcy (right) – two “techno-diplomats” that made the first transnational television transmissions in Europe their mission.



Figure 6. Scene from our site visit in Cassel: we show the BBC film “The Paris Week” to locals who had never seen the pictures before.

## Biographies

Andreas Fickers is professor of contemporary and digital history at the University of Luxembourg. He is Director of the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History, the University's third Interdisciplinary Research Centre. He is involved in major European research networks ('Tensions of Europe Network,' 'European Television History Network', the 'Network for Experimental Media Archaeology'. Latest publications include *Communicating Europe: Technologies, Information, Events* (co-authored with Pascal Griset, Palgrave-McMillan 2018) and *Materializing Memories: Dispositifs, Generations, Amateurs* (edited with Susan Aasman and Jo Wachelder, Bloomsbury 2018).

Alexandre Germain is multimedia technician at the MediaCentre in the University of Luxembourg. He has come from a long career at the Centre Virtuel de la Connaissance sur l'Europe (CVCE) where he was working in digitizing audiovisual materials, and was in charge of all video productions, including all the oral history project. He specialized in audiovisual archiving on Media Assets Management systems and streaming video. He's also involved in user's experience and 'ergonomic relationship' between multimedia publishers and their respective audience.

Andy O'Dwyer is head of the Digital History-Lab of the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (University of Luxembourg) and has come from a long career at the BBC, working in archive preservation and digitization of audio-visual material. He later moved into BBC Research & Development as a Technologist. There he focused on projects involving scanning, usability and enabling online access for both researchers and the public to the BBC's collections. He is also a contributing author of the book 'A European Television History' (Bignell and Fickers eds., Wiley-Blackwell, 2008) and coeditor of the book 'User Studies in Digital Library Development' (Facet Publishing, 2012).