

Andreas Fickers; Andy O'Dwyer

Reading Between the Lines: A Transnational History of the Franco-British 'Entente Cordiale' in Post-War Television

2012-11-29

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/14057>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Fickers, Andreas; O'Dwyer, Andy: Reading Between the Lines: A Transnational History of the Franco-British 'Entente Cordiale' in Post-War Television. In: *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture*, Jg. 1 (2012-11-29), Nr. 2, S. 56–70. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/14057>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://doi.org/10.18146/2213-0969.2012.jethc019>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen 4.0 Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Share Alike 4.0 License. For more information see:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>

READING BETWEEN THE LINES

A TRANSNATIONAL HISTORY OF THE FRANCO-BRITISH 'ENTENTE CORDIALE' IN POST-WAR TELEVISION¹

Andreas Fickers

Maastricht University
Grote Gracht 90-92
Postbox 616
6200 MD Maastricht
The Netherlands

a.fickers@maastrichtuniversity.nl

Andy O'Dwyer

BBC Research
Centre House
56 Wood Lane
W12 7SB London
United Kingdom

andy.odwyer@bbc.co.uk

Abstract: In 1950 and 1952, the British Broadcast Corporation (BBC) and Radio Télévision Française (RTF) realized the first transnational television transmissions ever. The so called 'Calais Experiment' (1950) and the 'Paris Week' (1952) were celebrated as historic landmarks in European television and celebrated as a new 'entente cordiale' between the two countries. This article aims at highlighting some of the tensions that surrounded the realization of these first experiments in transnational television by embedding the historic events into the broader context of television development in Europe and by emphasizing the hidden technological interests at stake. In line with current trends in transnational and European television historiography, the article analyses transnational media events as performances that highlight the complex interplay of the technical, institutional and symbolic dimension of television as a transnational infrastructure.

Keywords: Transnational history, BBC, RTF, Eurovision, experimental television

1 Introduction

What is generally praised as the first instance of transnational television and an historic landmark in European television history, the Franco-British 'Calais experiment' of August 1950 and the 'Paris week' of July 1952, is in fact a perfect showcase to demonstrate both the ambitions and the challenges of institutionalising the new medium of television as a "champion national" both in Britain and in France. This article aims to highlight some of the tensions that surrounded the realisation of these first experiments in transnational television in the early 1950s by embedding

¹ This article will be published in French in the book *Jean d'Arcy, la communication au service des droits de l'homme*, edited by Marie-Françoise Lévy and Maryvonne Le Puloch (in 2013). The authors would like to thank the organisers of the Colloquium on d'Arcy in Paris in February 2012 for the opportunity of presenting their research and for their kind hospitality.

the historic events into the broader context of television development in both countries and by highlighting the hidden techno-political agenda during the negotiations of this new televisual 'entente cordiale' between the television services of the two countries. In line with current trends in transnational and European television historiography, the article analyses transnational media events as performances that highlight the complex interplay of the technical, institutional and symbolic dimension of television as a transnational infrastructure.²

We will argue that the will to collaborate and to make television a preferred object of transnational co-operation was – on the one side – embedded into a conciliatory rhetoric of Franco-British friendship in post-war Europe, using the symbolic spillover of television as the new "window to the world" as a metaphorical strategy. On both sides of the Channel, the collaboration between the two national public broadcasting organisations BBC and RTF was celebrated as an important Franco-British partnership in a technology full of symbolic inscriptions.³ In addition, the successful trans-Channel transmissions of 1950 and 1952 paved the way for the first experiments in European television relays during the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953 that eventually led to the emergence of institutionalised structures of television programme exchanges and live broadcasts within the European Broadcasting Union and the birth of Eurovision in 1954. The Franco-British tandem quite naturally became a leading actor in the development of this new European infrastructure and figures such as the French director of programmes at RTF, Jean d'Arcy, developed into a transnational agent for the promotion and realisation of television across Europe.⁴

Yet on the other side, the rhetorical reference to the 'entente cordiale' between the two nations which had a long record of historic enmity masked a fierce techno-political conflict that characterised the post-war European television landscape: a conflict about the technical standards of black and white television in Europe and, most importantly, about the line standard that, at least to a large degree, defined the resolution and picture quality of the television image. While the British reopened their television services after the war using their pre-war 405 line standard, the French adopted a so-called high-definition standard of 819 lines by political decree in 1948.⁵ From a technical point of view, both the Calais Experiment and the Paris Week were therefore dependent on the development of a technical interface, a so-called line converter, operating as a gateway between the two standards. Whereas the rather hand-made solution to this problem by the technicians and engineers of the BBC and RTF fulfilled its goal during the 1950 and 1952 experiments, both parties actively promoted their standards as European models on the international scene, trying to convince emerging television nations in Europe of their technical superiority. In fact, as will be demonstrated in the second part of the article, both the British and the French pursued a protectionist industrial strategy, trying to secure the best possible starting position for their domestic radio industry in the booming television business.

In order to reconstruct this two-faced nature of the early experiments of Franco-British television in post-war Europe, a transnational historical perspective is indispensable. Only the rigorous study of a multitude of traditions from British, French and 'European' archives⁶ allows for a critical analysis and careful interpretation of a series of events that have – at least in the 'official' historiography of British and French television – become 'milestones' in a teleological narrative of European television that culminates in the birth of 'Eurovision' as the natural result of the pioneering efforts of such "brothers in arms" as the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Radio Télévision Française. Films such as *The Expansion of Television* (BBC, 1960) are a fine example of how television itself actively participates in the construction of its own history – and of its own myths and legends. The sequences shown in *The Expansion of Television* were

2 For current trends in European television historiography in a transnational perspective see Jonathan Bignell and Andreas Fickers, eds, *A European Television History*, Malden, 2008; Andreas Fickers and Catherine Johnson, eds, *Transnational Television History: A Comparative Approach*, New York, 2012. On the multi-dimensional nature of television as a European infrastructure see Andreas Fickers and Suzanne Lommers, 'Eventing Europe: Broadcasting and the mediated performances of Europe', in Alexander Badenoch and Andreas Fickers, eds, *Materializing Europe: Transnational Infrastructures and the Project of Europe*, Basingstoke, 2010, pp. 225-251.

3 On the symbolic inscriptions of television as symbol of modernity, new medium, and 'window to the world' see Jeffrey Sconce, *Hunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*, Durham, 2007.

4 Although slightly hagiographic in places, see Sylvie Pierre's biographical sketch for details about d'Arcy's television career: Sylvie Pierre, *Jean d'Arcy, une ambition pour la télévision (1913-1983)*, Paris, 2003.

5 For details about this debate see Andreas Fickers, "Politique de la grandeur" versus "Made in Germany", *Politische Kulturgeschichte der Technik am Beispiel der PAL-SECAM-Kontroverse*, München 2007, 65-100.

6 The research for this article builds on archival evidence from the BBC Written Archives Centre in Caversham, the BBC Audiovisual Archives at Brentford, the Public Record Office in Kew, London, the French National Archives in Fontainebleau, the Philips Company Archives in Eindhoven, and the Archives of the European Broadcasting Union in Geneva.

taken from original film footage of the Calais and Paris Week events and have since become part of a canonised audiovisual narrative of European television history – shown and re-used in every major BBC production on the history of television in Britain and Europe.⁷ But let us first have a look at the historic events themselves in order to appreciate the symbolic capital that was invested on both sides of the Channel to stage these experiments as milestones of Franco-British television co-operation.

2 From the ‘Calais Experiment’ (1950) to the ‘Paris Week’ (1952)



Fig. 1-3. Screenshots from the BBC film *The Calais Experiment* (1951) showing the ‘Hôtel de ville’ in Calais which formed the coulisse for the first trans-Channel television transmission in August 1950. Source: BBC Audiovisual Archives, London.

It was in August 1950 that technicians of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Radiodiffusion and Télévision Françaises (RTF) performed the so-called ‘Calais Experiment’, the first transnational live transmission of television pictures ever realised. On 27 August, a hundred years later almost to the day since the first submarine telegraph cable was laid, a one hour variety programme called ‘Calais en Fête’ was carried by means of four lightweight micro-wave radio links in tandem from Calais to London. The one hour programme, presented by the two bi-lingual commentators Richard Dimbleby and Alan Adair from the BBC, was inaugurated with a speech of welcome by the Mayor of Calais. It then showed various features of a French town fête including a torchlight procession, led by the Municipal Band of Calais, consisting of local inhabitants in their national costumes, a presentation of a family in the typical local dress, a short film feature demonstrating the devastations of Calais during the Second World War and shots of public dancing on the big stage in front of the Town Hall with a firework display as the finale of the proceedings.⁸ While the French ‘offered’ Calais as a symbolic location for this bilateral endeavour⁹, the BBC and the British radio industry provided the complete technical infrastructure.¹⁰ As an engineering press statement from the BBC stated, the broadcast was “the culmination of much painstaking research and experiment by the BBC’s engineers and the British radio manufacturers”. In particular, the 65km leap across the Channel presented special problems to the engineers, as the television signal received at Dover fluctuated with changes in the weather and the tides and was even affected by the passage of ships through the Channel¹¹.

7 These iconic pictures of European television history are, amongst others, re-used in the following BBC productions: *Salute to Alexandra Palace* (19 March 1954), *The Expansion of Television* (January 1960), *Window on the World: The Story of Europe’s TV* (30 October 1986), *Richard Dimbleby: Voice of the Nation* (30 November 1990).

8 A telerecording of this historic programme was consulted at the Audiovisual Archives of the BBC in Brentford.

9 In a BBC Television News release from 21 August 1950, Calais was announced as “the key to France”. According to this press statement, the purpose of the programme was to “show the lighter and brighter side of life in one of France’s most important ports” and to link two nations “separated by water and speaking different languages”. See BBC Written Archives Centre (BBC WAC), Caversham, T14/214/2, TV OB, Calais Programme, File 1B, 1950-51.

10 The planning and transmission of the programme was co-ordinated by the Engineering Division of the BBC, while the equipment for linking Calais with London was supplied by four British companies: Standard Telephones and Cables Ltd., Marconi’s Wireless Telegraphy Company Ltd., Pye Ltd., and Mullard Electronic Products Ltd. The whole project was realised in co-operation with the General Post Office, the Mayor of Calais, the Calais Chamber of Commerce, the French Post Office, and Radiodiffusion Française.

11 See ‘First Television Outside Broadcasting from the Continent’, BBC Engineering Statement No.83, 15 August 1950, BBC WAC, T14/214/2, op cit.



Fig. 4. Television crosses the Channel: BBC television presenter Richard Dimbleby with a Calais family in traditional costumes and a highly decorated French veteran. Source: BBC Audiovisual Archives, Brentford.

The Calais-experiment had demonstrated the technical feasibility of a trans-Channel television transmission, but the enterprise was – at least on the technical level – a purely British one and the programme could only be watched by viewers in the UK. The next step was therefore the realisation of a real transnational programme, connecting Paris and London in a two-way link. For this purpose, the ‘Anglo-French Television Liaison Committee’ that had been inaugurated in late 1949, met at half yearly intervals alternating between Paris and London.¹² During their meetings, the committee discussed the future exchange of television programmes (newsreels, short documentaries, and television films), the co-production of a television film called *Seine – Thames*, and tackled technical (line standards) as well as legal issues (mainly copyright problems) of their envisioned co-operation. Yet the initial ambition to do another event the following year (1951) proved unrealistic. The obstacles faced were mainly technical and financial in nature. From a technical point of view, the Paris-Lille radio link was still under construction, and there was little hope that the Lille-Calais radio relay could be provided by RTF within the next few years. The different line standards (819 in France and 405 in Britain) posed a major technical challenge for the television engineers who had to improvise a conversion between the two standards at some point in the relay chain. In addition to these technical challenges, the RTF faced major budget constraints, making a re-enactment of the Calais-experiment in 1951 impossible.¹³

Despite these financial and technical hurdles, the Heads of BBC and RTF, William Haley and Waldimir Porché,

12 Members of the Committee were: a) on the British side: Cecil McGivern (BBC television programme director), Eric Knott (Administrative Director of BBC television), Martin Pulling (Technical Director of BBC television), Cyril Cronner (International Relations Officer of BBC television) and Imlay Newbiggin Watts (Special Projects Officer of BBC television), and b) on the French side: Jean d’Arcy, Jacques Sallebert, Paul Gilson, Jean Arnaud, M. Chédeville.

13 See minutes of Liaison-Committee and other sources concerning the preparation of the Paris Week at the Archives Nationales, CAC Fontainebleau, 19950218, article 20.

decided during a meeting in London in July 1951 to stage the so-called 'Paris Week' in July 1952. Jean d'Arcy was designated official French Liaison Officer for the 'Paris Week' operation by Wladimir Porché on 19 November 1951, and Martin Pulling was his British counterpart.¹⁴ During several meetings of the Liaison Committee in London and Paris, all technical, organisational and programme related issues were discussed in detail. In between, tests of the technical infrastructure (especially OB equipment, radio links and standards converters) were conducted and site visits to planned film locations were realised which certainly fostered mutual familiarisation between the British and French teams. As another symbol of collaboration, the French 'speakerine' Jaqueline Joubert was invited as guest announcer for one week at the BBC and, respectively, Sylvia Peters visited the RTF a few weeks later. Jean d'Arcy even arranged a meeting between Richard Dimbleby and Etienne Lalou, the two elected presenters of the Paris Week, in order to harmonise their prepared commentaries, as Waldimir Porché wanted to see them in advance (much to the surprise and astonishment of Richard Dimbeby).¹⁵ But most importantly, both sides reached an agreement concerning the costs of the 'Paris Week' operation which determined that RTF had to meet 1/3 of the expected costs (2,570,000 FF) while the BBC accounted for 2/3 of the costs (5,141,000 FF).¹⁶



Fig. 5. Map showing the chain of relays for 'Paris Week' in July 1952. Source: BBC Audiovisual Archives, London.

14 See letter by Wladimir Porché, Archives Nationales, CAC Fontainebleau, 19950218, article 20.

15 See 'Notes on programme meeting held at Lime Grove on 28 May', BBC WAC, TII/8/1, TV Foreign Relays, Eurovision, General, File 1, 1949-1953.

16 Ibid.

After many preparatory meetings, a final agreement on the programme and all organisational aspects was reached during a Paris meeting in May 1952.¹⁷ During one week, Jean d'Arcy organised no fewer than 42 meetings in order to discuss all the organisational, technical and financial details with the Board of Managers of RTF, producers, technicians and presenters. Visits to film locations were realised and press communiqués and articles for television magazines were prepared. Despite the fact that d'Arcy mentioned "that RTF D.G. felt that publicity for the project was more useful in Britain than in France", he organised a press conference on 12 June 1952.¹⁸

From a technical point of view, the BBC had without doubt the position of a senior partner, while the development of a television infrastructure in France proved to be problematic.¹⁹ Despite this mismatch on the technological balance of power of the two nations, 'Paris-week' demonstrated an impressive joint venture of the two public services. Between 8-14 July 1952, eighteen programmes were originated in Paris and seen, simultaneously, by viewers in France and the United Kingdom.²⁰ As the map shows, a chain of relays linked not only Paris and London, but the British capital with the English regions and Scotland.

The programmes were controlled jointly by Jean d'Arcy and the Head of Outside Broadcasts at the BBC, Peter Dimmock. The series of programmes started on 8 July with an opening speech at the British Embassy in Paris followed by a long panorama shot from the Eiffel tower. Over the following days, viewers in France and the United Kingdom could 'participate' in a visit to the Louvre, a fashion show, a military tournament, the Tour de France, an impressive 'Défilé Militaire' and a glamorous 'Bal populaire' on 14 July, the French national holiday. The organisation of such a first transnational television exchange was a real challenge and required many meetings and visits. Technicians, programme makers, announcers and managers of both institutions met at regular intervals in Paris and London in order to discuss the aesthetic and practical sides of the programme, the technical problems (camera positions, standards conversion, relay network) and the financial and legal aspects of the endeavour.²¹



Fig. 6-8. Pictures showing an outside broadcasting van by Radio Industrie, an RTF camera team filming a street location and the live broadcast of the cabaret 'Stars in the Sky' staged in front of the Eiffel Tower on the first night of 'Paris Week' (Tuesday 8 July 1952). Source: BBC Audiovisual Archives, Brentford.

The mutual testimonies of credit by RTF and BBC officials after the realisation of 'Paris Week' in 1952 show that both the British and the French saw themselves as the pioneering tandem of a coming European television era. In a letter from the Director General of the BBC to his French counterpart, Wladimir Porché, William Haley wrote: "I'm sure that in the years to come this joint effort between RTF and the BBC will become an historic landmark in the progress of broadcasting, and we are pleased and proud that it should have been jointly undertaken between two such comrades in arms as the Radiodiffusion et Télévision Françaises and the BBC".²² In his reply two days later, Porché admitted

17 See 'Minutes of meetings of the Anglo/French Television Liaison Committee held in London on July 3rd & 4th, 1952', BBC WAC, TII/8/1, op cit, p.3. The French copies of the reports of the meetings are to found in the Archives Nationales, CAC Fontainebleau, 19950218, article 20.

18 See minutes of a meeting with McGivern on 28 May 1952, BBC WAC, TII/8/1, op cit.

19 The unclear legal statute of RTF as a public service institution entailed serious financial problems hindering a determined expansion of a nationwide television infrastructure. In comparison with other European countries, the dynamics of television development in France were significantly slower than in other television nations. See Jérôme Bourdon, *Haute Fidélité: Pouvoir et télévision 1935-1994*, Paris, 1994.

20 A telerecording of most of the programmes is conserved at the Audiovisual Archives of the BBC at Brentford.

21 See the protocols of the various meetings of the 'Franco-British committee of liaison' in the BBC WAC and the National Archives, CAC Fontainebleau.

22 Letter of William Haley to Wladimir Porché, 14 July 1952 BBC WAC, TII/8/3, Foreign TV Relays, Paris Week, General, File 3, 1952-53.

that this performance was the most memorable effort ever realised by the RTF and shared Haley's proudness of France and Great Britain being the motor of European collaboration on television matters.²³

The press too was quite pleased with the many performances and reported extensively about the event both in France and in Britain.²⁴ However, technicians and programme controllers involved articulated clear doubts about the aesthetic quality of the programmes and the nature of the French-British collaboration. Cecil McGivern, controller of BBC television, noted that "there was little of the recent Paris/London week in which we could take real pleasure"²⁵, and BBC Head of Outside Broadcasts, Peter Dimmock, was sharply critical: "Circumstances made it quite impossible for me to exercise much authority and leadership in connection with the programmes." And with a petition for historical mercy he ended: "All in all, it was a heartbreaking experiment but I sincerely hope that if a long term view is taken it will have been considered worthwhile".²⁶ In a slightly conciliatory tone, Richard Dimpleby, who had already officiated as BBC presenter in the Calais experiment, wrote:

I hope, next time – if there is a next time – that a great many of our initial troubles will have been righted. I think that everyone on our side worked tremendously hard under unbelievable difficulties. I was rather doubtful in the first few days whether we were straining the entente cordiale a little too far but I think that a friendly last night proved that we have made many friends among the French.²⁷



Fig. 9-10. The iconography of the televisual 'entente cordiale' plays with national emblems: the Eiffel Tower and Big Ben mirror each other in the televisual lens, Britannia and Marianne greet each other while holding a television screen showing the logos of the BBC and RTF in their hands. Source: left: 'Paris Week' as front-page motif for the BBC magazine *The Radio Times*, July 1952, and right: as opening sequence of a documentary produced by the BBC film unit in 1953.

23 Letter of Wladimir Porché to William Haley, 17 July 1952, BBC WAC, TII/8/3, op cit.

24 For coverage of the French press on the event see dossier 57 'Semaine franco-britannique at the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA)', 00014464-29.

25 Written notice of Cecil McGivern, 21 July 1952, BBC WAC, TII/8/3, op cit.

26 Peter Dimmock, 'Paris Week – O.B. Report', 5 August 1952, BBC WAC, TII/8/3, op cit.

27 Letter from Richard Dimpleby, 24 July 1952, BBC WAC, TII/8/3, op cit.

3 BBC and RTF: Leaders on the Road to Eurovision?

Despite the criticisms of the BBC staff, the 'Calais Experiment' and 'Paris Week' demonstrated the feasibility of a bilateral television programme and thereby backed Bezançon's plans of a regular television programme exchange organised by the EBU. But the vision of 'Eurovision' needed another impulse to break through. This impulse was the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. in June 1953. For the first time in television history an event was broadcast live into five countries: Great Britain, France, Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands. From a cultural history perspective, the effect of this transmission on the public can not be overestimated. The feeling of a televisual be-part-of created by the live transmission of motion pictures undoubtedly encouraged television development all over the world.²⁸ A fascination provoked by this 'window on the world' could be seen everywhere. Although the Coronation transmission was realised by the national broadcasting institutions of the five countries involved and therefore was not an official EBU activity, its effects on the latter were strong. As Wolfgang Degenhardt and others have shown, the technical expenditure was enormous – especially the costly equipment for the line-conversion – “but the propagandistic effect of this pioneer performance can't be weighted with money”.²⁹ The Coronation broadcast of 2 June 1953 was the last one in a series of 15 programmes transmitted in May and June from the BBC to French viewers (ranging from newsreels and music hall to panel shows and children's television). Again, the Coronation was acclaimed a milestone of French-British collaboration by Porché in a letter to Sir Ian Jacob, the new director general of the BBC:

To come finally to the most recent relays which have taken place this year, we should remember that these were first planned by the BBC and RTF, that we formed, as it were, the common tree trunk on which were grafted the branches providing for the other continental television services; in short, we bore together, your organisation and ours, the heaviest responsibility and, again together, we took the initiative in this magnificent undertaking.³⁰

Without doubt, the transmission of the Coronation shaped a new horizon of televisual expectations in a number of European countries. At the end of July 1953, a first conference of western European countries on international television relays was hosted at Broadcasting House in London. Representatives of France, Great Britain, West Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and the European Broadcasting Union made an evaluation of the Coronation experience and discussed the future of television programme exchanges in Europe.³¹ While technical problems clearly dominated the debates – especially the problem of line standard conversion³² and the possibility of permanent radio links between the different countries – the French launched a new programme exchange initiative at Christmas, 1953.³³ But the French plan proved to be too optimistic. Due to the technical challenge of realising a two-way transmission network linking the six countries involved (the Coronation was 'only' a one-way transmission from London to the other countries), the project was postponed and finally realised as the first EBU Eurovision programme exchange in the summer of 1954. The first European television exchange was the biggest experiment in international television collaboration of its time. Over 4,000 kilometres of radio circuits linked 44 relay transmitters in eight countries (Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland). Again, the challenge of line standard conversion and sound transmission was enormous. In Breda (NL), a converter point was realised for the conversion from either French or Belgian 819 line or British 405 line pictures to 625 lines. The RTF team in Paris

28 Monika Bernold, 'Fernsehen ist gestern: Medienhistorische Transformationen und televisuelles Dabeisein nach 1945', *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 12 (2001), 4, 8-29.

29 Wolfgang Degenhardt and Elisabeth Strautz, *Auf der Suche nach dem europäischen Programm: Die Eurovision 1954/1970*, Nomos Verlag, 1999, p.38.

30 BBC WAC, TII/8/3, op cit.

31 On the sometimes problematic relationship between the EBU and Bezançon's plan of a European programme exchange and the bi- or multilateral initiatives see Strautz Degenhardt, *Auf der Suche*, pp.29-39.

32 For a detailed analysis of the line standard problem see Andreas Fickers, "Politique de la grandeur" versus "Made in Germany", *Die Analyse der PAL-SECAM-Farbfemsehkongress als Beispiel einer politischen Kulturgeschichte der Technik*, München 2007; 'National barriers for an imag(e)ined European community: The technopolitical frames of post-war television development in Europe', in *Northern Lights: Film and Media Studies Yearbook 2005*, Copenhagen 2006, pp.15-36.

33 See M.J.L. Pulling (Senior Superintendent Engineer, BBC Television Broadcasting): 'Conference on International Television Relays', BBC WAC, TII/8/1, op cit.

managed the conversion from either 625 or 405 lines to 819 lines, while BBC staff in Dover secured the conversion from either 625 or 819 lines to the British 405 line standard. Because no electronic converter systems existed at that time, the technical solution of this problem was to place a 405, 625, or 819 line camera in front of a 405, 625, or 819 line receiver³⁴ in order to re-televise the picture in the standard of the pick-up tube (camera).

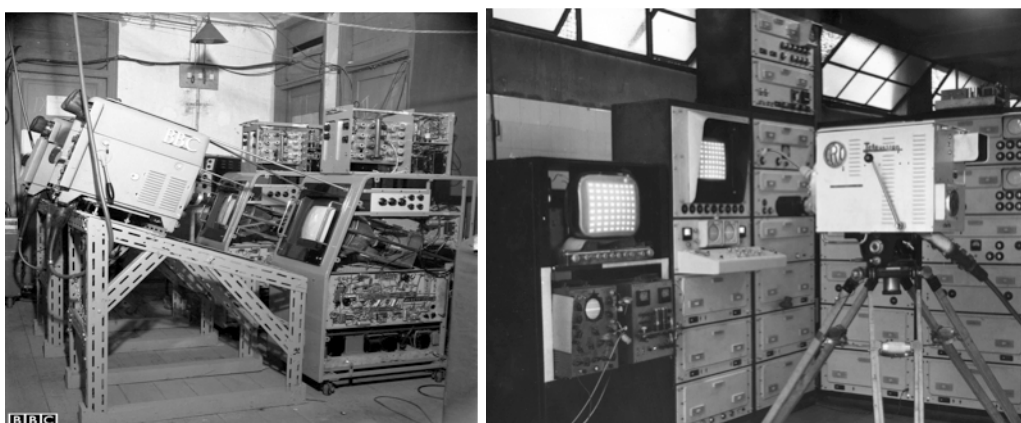


Fig. 11-12. Left: A BBC 405 line camera in front of French 819 line receiver during Paris Week at the converter station in Cassel. Right: French 819 line camera (Radio Industrie) in front of 405 line British television set at the top of the Eiffel Tower. Both converters were first and successfully tested during the Franco-British Liaison Committee meeting in Paris in February 1952. Source: BBC Audiovisual Archives, London.

The following description of the journey of a British 405 line picture taken in London to different countries of destination might help demonstrate the complexity of this endeavour. The programme left London and travelled in a series of hops via Wrotham and Dover across the Channel to Cassel, France, where it was taken over by the RTF and carried to Lille. Here the programme was divided: in one direction it went to Paris for conversion to 819 lines and distribution on the French network; in the other direction it went over a series of links installed in Belgium to Holland. In the Netherlands (Breda), the British 405 line picture was converted to the continental standard of 625 lines and then distributed in one direction to Belgium and in the other to the Dutch network and then onwards to Cologne over new relay stations especially installed for this purpose. Here the signals joined the West German TV network and were fed to all the German transmitting stations. From Hamburg, a series of special links continued the circuit as far north as Copenhagen, while from the southern end of the German network near Baden-Baden a link was established to Chasseral, Switzerland. From this point the signals travelled to Zurich for transmission on the Swiss network and also separately across Switzerland to Italy, the intermediate relay points being on the Jungfrau and Monte-Generoso before finally descending to Milan. At Milan the signals joined the Italian network and found their way as far south as Rome.³⁵

It was not only the pictures that had to travel but sound too. For BBC controller Cecil McGivern, sound transmission was even more complicated due to the different languages involved. Because of the limited bandwidth, it was not possible to transmit the voices of the commentators of all seven countries participating in parallel. In each filming location, only two or three commentators were actually on the spot bringing events to life and steering the cameramen. For the large majority of programmes, local commentaries were added in each of the receiving countries based on the picture seen by the commentator on a monitor. To assist the commentator in these cases, a 'guide' at the programme end passed on information and advice, either in English or French, to the commentator. This – of course – could not be heard by the viewers.³⁶

³⁴ The incoming signals were displayed on a specially coated cathode-ray tube and the scanning lines were broadened to eliminate the line structure.

³⁵ See *The Expansion of Television*, a 20 minute BBC documentary on the history of early European television development (1961), BBC Audiovisual Archives, London

³⁶ See 'Handout for the press conference in Paris', 2 June 1954, BBC WAC, T23/26, TV Publicity, Eurovision, 1953-55.

While the technical realisation of Eurovision as a material performance was generally celebrated as a historic milestone in television history and of European integration by both the makers and the public, the programmes themselves mainly reflected national particularities and often mirrored stereotyped images of national customs and traditions. As Cecil McGivern concluded, with a hint of desperation, in his speech at the Radio Industries Luncheon: “Every country is typical – France, Versailles and the revue; Germany, the youth camp on the Rhine, etc., and it was impossible to get away from that”.³⁷

4 The Techno-Politics of Transnational Television in Post-War Europe

The post-war European television landscape was characterised by a nationalistic techno-political battle over black and white television line standards. While Britain had reopened its television service in 1946 using the pre-war standard of 405 lines, the French introduced a 819-line ‘high definition’ standard in 1949. In addition to that, the influential Dutch radio manufacturer Philips promoted a 567-line system, developed by the multinational as a European variant of the American 525-line system.³⁸ Yet another 625-line alternative, originally developed by Russian television engineers, was prominently backed by West Germany and Switzerland.

TV SYSTEMS 1948	GB	USA	France	G/CH/SU	Philips
Total bandwidth of channel	6 Mc/s	6 Mc/s	18 Mc/s	7 Mc/s	6 Mc/s
Video bandwidth including sound	3 Mc/s	4 Mc/s	10 Mc/s	5 Mc/s	4 Mc/s
Number of lines per picture	405	525	819	625	567
Number of pictures per second	25	30	25	25	25
Sound modulation	A.M.	F.M.	F.M.	F.M.	F.M.
Polarity of modulation	positive	negative	positive	negative	negative

Table 1. Many different standards involved in early television made the European television landscape a complex and fragmented communication space.

This post-war line standard debate must be interpreted as a techno-nationalist conflict of technical, symbolic and

³⁷ Speech given by Cecil McGivern at the Radio Industries Club Luncheon, London, 22 April 1954, BBC WAC, T23/26, op cit.

³⁸ The first National Television System Committee in the United States had developed the 525 line system in 1940–41 which was officially recognised as US standard by the FCC on the 2 May 1941. On the work of the first NTSC see Albert Abramson, *The History of Television 1880 to 1941*, Jefferson, 1987, pp.257–273. The US standard of 525 lines could not simply be adopted in Europe because of a difference in the mains frequency (50 Hz in Europe and 60 Hz in USA). The mains frequency influences the pulse frequency for the electronic transmission of television pictures: the television pictures are scanned line by line with a pulse frequency of half the mains frequency. In Europe, television pictures are transmitted with a ratio of 25 pictures per second, compared to 30 pictures per second in the US.

economic dimensions.³⁹ 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. The choice of a line standard therefore deeply affected the radio industry of a country and – this became a heated topic among British manufacturers – affected the export business.⁴⁰ Following the ‘first-mover’ theory, many British stakeholders in the late 1940s and early 1950s thought that a rapid installation of a national television infrastructure in Britain based on the pre-war standard would enhance the competitiveness of the British radio industry with its American rivals and create technical leadership on the European continent. But the problem of line standards was not purely a technical and economic question. The number of lines, defining the picture quality (luminous density or brightness and its sharpness) in a physical sense, also affected the aesthetic perception of the moving images. The early history of television was dominated by the quest for a higher picture resolution, symbolised by the constant raising of the number of lines.⁴¹ As we will see, this symbolic dimension of the line standard was to become a major ‘reverse salient’ both for the ‘low’ and ‘high-definition’ system of the British and French standards. The Television Advisory Committee of the Postmaster General concluded in late 1947:

Whilst it is unquestionable that the results obtained with the British television system compare favourable with those obtained anywhere else in the world, the number of lines is commonly taken as a criterion of the quality of the system, and this is the reason why we are at present experiencing resistance to the acceptance of British 405 line system abroad. [...] it is recognised that the main problems are basically ones of policy and politics.⁴²

Before the official announcement of the French Minister of Information (François Mitterrand) on 21 November 1948 to start with a ‘high-definition’ system in 1949, British industrials and public authorities were rather confident that they could convince other European countries – including the French and the Belgians – to adopt the British 405-line standard. But the aggressive propagation of the French standard by the French authorities caused serious trouble in British circles. After the failed attempt of the British Radio Electronics Manufacturers Association (BREMA) to create a strategic alliance with Philips, it seemed more and more improbable that the British standard could be exported.⁴³ Because all bilateral and industrial initiatives to harmonise the line-standard chaos remained unsuccessful, the topic was put on the agenda of the CCIR (International Radio Consultative Committee) and of the Brussels Treaty Permanent Commission. The CCIR, founded in 1927 as the radio communication branch of the International Telegraph Union (ITU), was concerned with the formulation of general recommendations to national telecommunications administrations on technical matters to all forms of radio communication.⁴⁴ One major concern of the CCIR was of course the co-ordination of technical standards, regarded as vital gateways for the enabling of transnational communication services. Because of the complex and controversial nature of the line standard issue, the Study Group XI (television) organised an intermediary meeting in Zurich in July 1949 in order to discuss the line standard problem. At the Zurich meeting, the members of the Study Group decided to organise a number of visits of inspection in order to study the different systems actually in operation. When the delegates of the Study Group XI

39 See Andreas Fickers, *‘Politique de la grandeur’ versus ‘Made in Germany’: Die Analyse der PAL-SECAM-Farbfernsehkcontroverse als Beispiel einer politischen Kulturgeschichte der Technik*, München, 2007.

40 Since 1949, British and French authorities (including different ministries like PTT, industry and foreign affairs and the broadcasting institutions) seriously discussed the possibility of linking the two television networks of the countries by a submarine cable in the Channel. This idea, although promoted by different actors on both sides of the Channel, was finally rejected because of the many technical insecurities (the line standard question was crucial here too as it impacted on the definition of the capacity of such a cable), financial implications and developments in transmission of television signals by radio waves.

41 In electro-mechanical television systems based on the so called Nipkow-disc, the number of holes in the rotating disc defined the number of lines of the picture. The Scottish television pioneer John Logie Baird presented its first television pictures with a 30-hole disc in 1926 and – to use the words of BBC engineer Edward Pawley – pursued the augmentation of lines up to 280 with ‘dogged determination’. See Edward Pawley, *BBC Engineering 1922-1973*, London: BBC Publications 1972, p. 139. But the electro-mechanical systems which clearly dominated the first wave of amateur television all around the world proved to be a dead end when faced with the advantages of all-electronic systems in the 1930s.

42 See the copy of the TAC report in the Philips Company Archives, PCA 811.3 and 814.3, Dossier Hartong, 194650.

43 The failed attempts were described in a letter from H.H. Leeuwijn to J.J. Haver Droeze, Director General of S.A. Philips Éclairage et Radio in Paris, 27 November 1947, Philips Company Archives, PCA 811.3 and 814.3, op cit.

44 The work of the Committee was organised by plenary meetings at intervals of two or three years and structured in thirteen study groups, focusing on particular spheres of radio communication. Study Group XI was concerned with all matters of television. For a history of the CCIR see George A. Coddington, *The International Telecommunication Union: an Experiment in International Cooperation*, Geneva, 1952 (PhD).

reported about their visits in the US, France, the Netherlands and the UK at their next intermediary meeting in London in May 1950, it became clear that all systems had their merits and weak points, but that they all offered a practicable and qualitatively satisfying service.⁴⁵

More important than these technical evaluations, which did not really come as a surprise for most delegates, was that a majority of delegates at the London meeting clearly demonstrated their sympathy for the 625-line variant, which seemed to be a kind of compromise between the British standard – generally qualified as being too low – and the French one, criticised for being too ambitious. The Belgians, who feared to find themselves surrounded by different standards, launched an official appeal both to the French and the British delegation to join – for the sake of European unity – the 625-line standard. But neither their CCIR appeal nor their lobbying for a compromise at several meetings of the Cultural Committee of the Brussels Treaty Permanent Commission in London (January 1950) and Paris (February 1950) provoked any change of reasoning in the British or French milieus.⁴⁶ Quite the opposite: the French even intensified their diplomatic courting for new 819-line adapts and overtly propagated their system as both technically superior and as a symbol of ingenious French technology. The British on the other hand continued to rationalise their adherence to the 405-line system in making a case for the economic reasons of their behaviour. In a report by the Television Advisory Committee (TAC) in April 1950, the adoption of the British system is defended because of two main points: 1) economy of costs; 2) economy in wavelength allocations. While the economy of costs was justified with a comparison to the French receivers, which apparently cost 15% more than the British ones, the economy of wavelength allocations was indeed a strong argument in favour of the British standard. The greater number of lines meant *de facto* a greater need for bandwidth for a television channel. As the number of channels available in a given frequency band depended on the bandwidth of the channels, introducing the French system *de facto* meant limiting the number of television channels in those frequency bands available for television broadcasting at that time (bands I and III). The TAC stated that having seen the satisfactory service of the 405-line system in terms of quality and its unquestionable economy in terms of bandwidth allocation, the “system would be extended generally and maintained for a number of years. The only possible way of achieving standardisation in Western Europe”, the committee concluded, “is by the adoption of the British system”.⁴⁷

The ambivalent feeling towards both the British and the French system that most other countries felt was literally expressed by the Philips engineer and head of television research and development at Eindhoven, J.A. Bouman. At a ‘Television Apparatus Congress’ organised by Philips in November 1950, Bouman gave a lecture on ‘Television Systems’, where he recapitulated the recent debate on line standards, opening his speech with the provocative statement that “speaking about systems means talking about fairy tales”. After denying that there was such a thing as ‘the Philips system’, Bouman summarised the European discussions as follows:

It would be more advantageous to have the same system all over the world with one of its advantages of being able to produce cheaper sets. But it was quite clear that the three systems would not change from their original or starting point due to the fact that too many sets had already been sold, matter of prestige etc. [...] During the international discussions both England and France have made much propaganda for their systems and both parties did this with some right. The 819 lines give a very good image but are more expensive. The English side told us that the English system is the cheapest in the world and that their sets contain the smallest number of tubes and components. The English sets give good pictures and the programmes are good, but with these two extremes, most of the delegates were of the opinion that the French system was too expensive and the English not good enough. The result was that the delegates felt that they should decide on something in between the two 625 lines lies in between the two.⁴⁸

45 For detailed information on the work of the Study Commission XI on line standards between 1948 and 1951 see the report by the French delegate Stéphane Mallein, Archives Nationales (CAC Fontainebleau), 870714, Article 14.

46 A report on the discussions at the Cultural Committee of the Brussels Treaty Permanent Commission is to be found in the note on international television standards by the Post Office, 4 April 1950, National Archives, London, T219/422, pp.2-4.

47 See ‘Television Advisory Committee. International Television Standards, Note by the Post Office/T.A.C. (R) 9’, 4 April 1950, National Archives, London, T219/422, p. 4.

48 Lecture on ‘Television Systems’ by J.A. Bouman at the ‘Television Apparatus Congress’ at Eindhoven, 7-10 November 1950. More than 20 countries were represented at this conference, where all matters of television technology were discussed: line standards, test equipment, colour television, cabinets, TV schematics, components, optical parts, valves, cathode-ray tubes, the training of personnel, and receivers. See the detailed documentation of the Congress at Philips Company Archives, DA811.31/1a, ‘Television Apparatus Congress’.

Despite ongoing discussions at the Study Group XI in Geneva (May 1951) and a lot of public debate about the problematic future of television programme exchange in Europe, the *de facto* fragmentation of the European black and white television landscape turned into a *de jure* situation during the CCIR plenary conference in Stockholm in the summer of 1952. While the 625-line standard was adopted in nearly all continental Europe, Asia, Australia and Argentina, the French 819-line standard was to be used in France, Luxembourg, in the French speaking part of Belgium, and the Vatican.⁴⁹ Much to the regret of the British television industry, Great Britain remained the only region to use the 405-line standard.

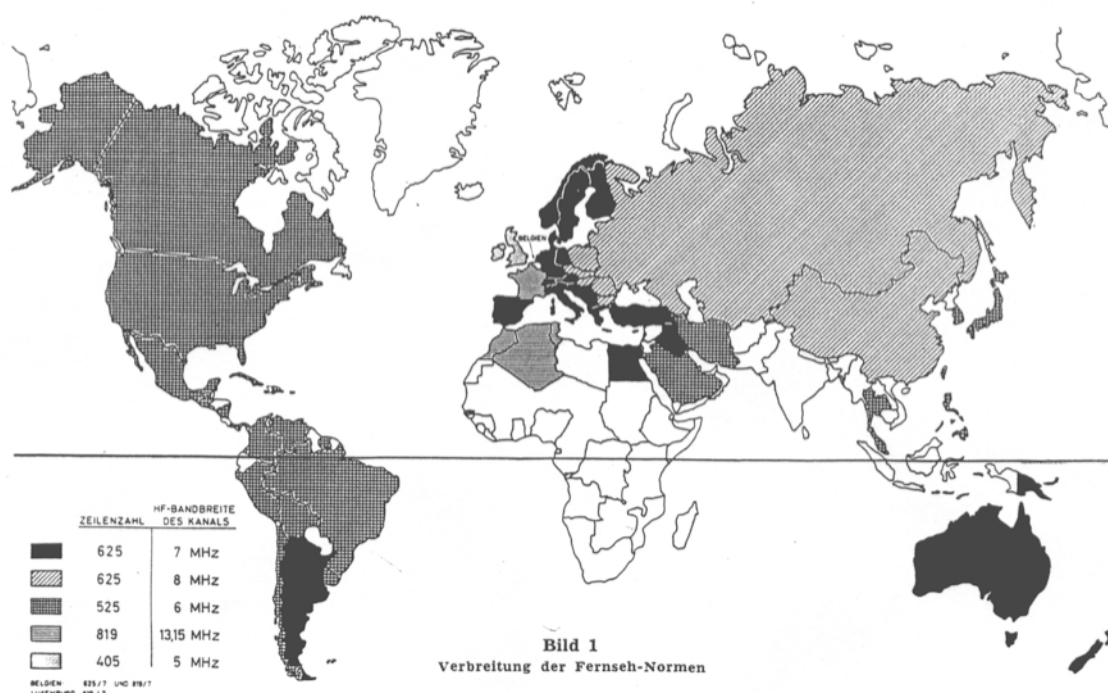


Fig. 13. World map showing the different line standards for black and white television after the CCIR Plenary Conference in Stockholm in 1952. Source: Rindfleisch, Hans, 'Der gegenwärtige Ausbau des Fernsehfunks im In- und Ausland', *Rundfunktechnische Mitteilungen*, 3, 1959, p.220.

5 Conclusions

When the CCIR efforts to harmonise the European television standards failed in 1952, many television critics lamented the potential retarding effects for the development of television as a means of international understanding. The different standards without doubt complicated the exchange of television programmes, but in contrast to their techno-political rivalry, France and Britain took the lead in realising the first transnational television transmissions ever. At the height of the line standard debate in the early 1950s, technicians from the BBC and the RTF collaborated on the 'Calais Experiment' and 'Paris Week'. The first transnational experiments in European television thus leaves us with a quite astonishing ambivalence: on the one side, the BBC and RTF must be credited for their visionary efforts in producing the first transnational television transmissions ever and in symbolically and practically promoting the

⁴⁹ The adoption of the French standard at the Vatican was due to the fact that the French Government had offered the installation of a television service for free if the Vatican was willing to use the French system! The situation in Belgium was much more complicated. The Belgians decided to introduce the French and the 'continental' standard in order to be able to receive both the Dutch and the French programmes. The multi-standard receivers developed especially for the Belgian market were for a long time known as being the most complicated and expensive ones. See H. d'Haese, 'Un récepteur TV pentastandard à automatisme intégral', *Télévision*, 135, 1963, pp.179-182.

idea of television as a means of transnational and European understanding (the televisual 'entente cordiale'); on the other hand, both Britain and France tried hard to instrumentalise the new medium of television as a means of techno-political bargaining, protectionist industrial policy, and vehicle of cultural propaganda.

This ambivalence is also visible when it comes to the cultural and social dimension of the bilateral endeavour. Both sides unanimously used the events to symbolically promote the new medium of television as a 'window on the world' and to stage the fraternal rapprochement between the two nations, yet the internal documents show that the collaboration suffered from diverging aesthetic traditions, production routines, organisational cultures and, last but not least, financial capabilities. While the French hosted the events (including the heavy organisational tasks) and offered – at least in the case of the 'Paris Week' – their capital as metropolitan coulisse for the first transnational television transmissions worldwide, the British acted as senior partners concerning the technical, infrastructural and financial realisation of the projects. In a letter to William Haley, Director General of the BBC, Wladimir Porché expressed the sensitive nature of the Franco-British collaboration, but at the same time embedded his critical thoughts in a rhetoric that stressed the historic importance of the co-operation:

Cette semaine de fièvres, d'inquiétudes, de vicissitudes et de réussites laissera dans la mémoire des équipes de la RTF le souvenir d'un des moments les plus importants de leur existence. L'entreprise était pour nous assez périlleuse, en raison de la faiblesse relative des moyens dont nous disposons encore aujourd'hui. Mais l'insuffisance de ceux-ci fut largement compensée par la confiance que la BBC nous a faite, par le soutien confraternel que nous ont apporté tous vos collaborateurs, et l'alliance étroite qui a régné entre nos deux institutions qu cours des ces journées mouvementées. Cette première transmission constitue en effet un évènement historique et il m'est particulièrement agréable de penser que cet évènement se situe en France et en Angleterre. Il représente en somme le premier aboutissement à l'échelle mondiale des nos efforts communs, et l'ouverture d'une nouvelle voie où nous ne cesserons point, je l'espère, de cheminer ensemble^{50, 51}

The different roles and responsibilities clearly created some tensions during the planning and accomplishment of the experiments. But as the letter of Porché indicates, one could also describe these experiments as spaces of cultural negotiation and techno-political diplomacy. Following Peter Burke's work on cultural hybridity, the Franco-British television experiments in the early 1950s were laboratories of transnational exchange in a field that was largely dominated by national traditions and values. The 'Calais Experiment' and the 'Paris Week' shaped a space for transnational negotiations about the future of European television and paved the way for what Burke calls "hybrid practices" and "hybrid people".⁵²

As Sonja de Leeuw has shown on the example of the Dutch television pioneer Erik de Vries, transnationality in early television was not least the result of the circulation of knowledge and expertise, embodied by a relatively small group of experts in the young yet developing business (or art) of television.⁵³ Jean d'Arcy is clearly another example of such an early transnational or hybrid actor in the European television scene, circulating between the television cultures of the BBC and RTF and thereby carefully spanning his professional network. As the many letters from d'Arcy to his British counterparts – especially Cecil McGivern, Imlay Newbiggin-Watts and Peter Dimmock – show, these professional relationships often turned into real comradeship and even personal friendship. D'Arcy's plausibility, his diplomatic skills and his commitment to the project of television exchanges between the BBC and RTF made him a

50 "This week of fever, worries, vicissitudes and successes will be remembered as one of the most important moments of their lives in the memory of the R.T.F crew. Because of our limited means, the operation as such was a very delicate one. But this material and financial insufficiency was largely compensated by the confidence that the BBC provided in our capabilities, by the cooperative assistance of the BBC staff, and the close alliance between our two institutions during these turbulent days. This first transnational television transmission marks a historic event, and I'm particularly enchanted by thinking that this event happened in France and Great Britain. It is the first realisation of a transnational television transmission world wide and marks, hopefully, the beginning of new era that we will shape together."

51 Letter from Wladimir Porché to Sir William Haley, Paris, 17 July 1952, BBC written archives, Caversham, Signature T II / 13 / 2, TV Foreign Relays, Paris Week, Correspondance, 1951-1952, file 1 B.

52 Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009.

53 Sonja de Leeuw, 'Transnationality in Dutch (Pre) Television: The central role of Erik de Vries', in Andreas Fickers and Catherine Johnson, eds, *Transnational Television History: A Comparative Approach*, Routledge, 2012, pp.49-66.

central actor of the first transnational television exchanges ever and in those to come in a European (EBU) and global (UNESCO) setting.

Jean d'Arcy clearly saw the potential of television as a tool of rapprochement between people and nations and developed into an ambassador of this vision all around the world. Instead of lamenting the national differences between the television cultures in Europe, d'Arcy interpreted them as vital for the advancement of European culture and promoted the Eurovision idea as a successful model for a global network (tentatively called 'Univision') in the early 1960s.⁵⁴ At a time when the first transcontinental television exchanges had been realised by the use of satellites (Telstar experiments in 1962), d'Arcy believed that it was only a question of time before a worldwide network of television would be realised. As "the tool very often shapes the situation", he concluded his lecture, "the existence of space communications satellites will lead us to the creation of a world-wide network, and through this network to the creation of a world broadcasting organization".⁵⁵ But while d'Arcy was successful in facilitating the transnational idea of television on a European scale, his planetary vision has proved to be a bit too optimistic.

Biography

Andreas Fickers is Associate Professor of Comparative Media History at the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences of Maastricht University, The Netherlands. Together with Sonja de Leeuw he coordinates the [European Television History Network](#) and is a member of the Management Board of the [Tensions of Europe](#) network. His research focuses on the transnational history of media technologies and infrastructures and on the cultural history of media in a European perspective. Recent publications include: *A European Television History* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2008; co-edited with Jonathan Bignell) and *Materializing Europe. Transnational Infrastructures and the Project of Europe* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2010; co-edited with Alexander Badenoch).

Andy O'Dwyer is a Technologist/Project Manager at the BBC. He is currently working on initiatives to bring online audiovisual collections. He is active on a number of EU collaborative projects to support public and academic use of archival material, such as [AXES](#) and [EUscreen](#). As a member of the Television Studies Commission of [FIAT](#), he promotes new techniques in linking audiovisual material with the education sector. He is a member of the [European Television History Network](#), and a contributing author of the book *A European Television History* (Jonathan Bignell, Andreas Fickers eds., 2008). His most recent publication is *User Studies for Digital Library Development* (Facet Publishing, 2012), which he co-edited together with Milena Dobрева and Pierluigi Feliciati.

54 See the transcript of a speech given by Jean d'Arcy at the Brandeis University in Boston on 19 July 1962, at the archives of the EBU in Geneva.

55 Ibid, p.6.