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## Epistemic Practices at Radio Free Europe

Production and Circulation of *Cold War Knowledge* (1950–1971)

In the 1960s, the well-known Cold War broadcaster Radio Free Europe (RFE), amply researched by historians as a ‘propaganda’ radio, also became a highly reputed producer of research and knowledge on Eastern and Central Eastern Europe. While many Cold War media histories extensively cover RFE’s radio operations,<sup>16</sup> the epistemic side of RFE’s knowledge production and circulation is still largely unexplored. With an institutional history approach inspired by core assumptions of the history of knowledge, my project focuses on RFE’s epistemic practices for the creation and circulation of what I conceptualize as “Cold War Knowledge” from 1950 to 1971.

RFE was founded in 1950 as an international radio broadcaster to ‘win the hearts and minds’ of the Eastern and Central Eastern European people. Publicly depicted as a private organization under the umbrella of the Free Europe Committee, RFE was covertly and largely funded, yet only loosely controlled by the CIA until 1971, when the cover was blown. RFE was conceived as a “surrogate broadcaster”, a full-scale, (almost) round-the-clock radio service

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<sup>14</sup> Etwa: Ludwig Ferdinand Clauß: Als Beduine unter Beduinen, Freiburg im Breisgau 1933; Ders.: Araber. Berlin 1943.

<sup>15</sup> Etwa: Johann von Leers: Juden sehen Dich an, Berlin 1933; Ders.: Die Verbrechernatur der Juden. Berlin 1944.

<sup>16</sup> Friederike Kind-Kovács: Cold War Broadcasting, in: H-Soz-Kult, 01 October 2013, online: <https://www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/reb-15475>, accessed on 30 July 2020; Anna Bischof, Zuzana Jürgens (Eds.): Voices of Freedom – Western Interference? 60 Years of Radio Free Europe, Göttingen 2015.

that reported primarily on domestic issues in the Eastern bloc from afar in Munich: Enabled by an American management, émigrés from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Rumania, and Bulgaria were to speak in their native language to the people in their home countries via radio waves.

After focusing on hard-hitting, polemical propaganda for the first years, the Hungarian Uprising in 1956 became a caesura: RFE came under heavy scrutiny by the media and the public for some allegedly incendiary broadcasts during the Hungarian Uprising. Through the crisis, RFE officials realized that a political change in Eastern and Central Eastern Europe was not as imminent as they had desired. Therefore, they gave up their strategy of immediate 'liberation' and replaced the polemical propaganda style by a more 'objective' approach to the news programs and political commentaries. RFE should become the reliable alternative source of information and opinion that successfully rivaled the domestic media: Credibility was now key for the new strategy of invoking gradual change in the target countries.

The main challenge of this new approach was the gathering of timely, reliable, and news-worthy information from within their target areas to which they had no physical access. An own network of official correspondents was unthinkable. As Susan D. Haas has shown, one solution was the professionalization and expansion of the News and Information Department: This in-house news agency provided the editors with content for the scriptwriting of e.g. news programs.<sup>17</sup> Thereby, RFE managed to fill the information gap that the Iron Curtain caused.

Another strategy, however, has been less studied so far: In addition to the expansion of the day-to-day newsgathering, RFE also strengthened what could be called the sector of basic research with the institutionalization of the Research and Analysis Department.<sup>18</sup> Detached from the urgencies of the daily news cycle, RFE researchers should provide 'academic'-style evaluations of current events and longitudinal analyses of socio-political processes in their target areas. The resulting "Research Reports" informed scriptwriters on a variety of topics concerning the daily social and political life in Eastern and Central Eastern Europe. The reports became the epistemic backbone for the radio operations. Rigorous research should corroborate the broadcasters' news stories and political commentaries and thus maintain and expand RFE's credibility.

Besides its internal use for script writing, RFE's research was soon highly esteemed – and regularly accessed – by external professionals working on Eastern and Central Eastern Europe, such as academics, journalists, or officers from governmental agencies. By that, RFE and its "epistemic community" (Peter Haas) of researchers became an authoritative resource and a respected actor in Eastern European area studies. RFE representatives spoke at the major conferences of the field or appeared as experts in a wide range of other media. RFE's publications and research reports found hundreds of subscribers among university libraries worldwide. The "Research Reports" still today attract large numbers of historians studying the daily life behind the Iron Curtain.

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<sup>17</sup> Susan D. Haas: *Communities of Journalists and Journalism Practice at Radio Free Europe During the Cold War (1950–1995)*, PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania 2013, online: <https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/869>.

<sup>18</sup> This is only one of the many denominations the research section had over time.

Even though being highly reputed amongst specialists on the region then and now, no history of RFE so far has profoundly analyzed the epistemic practices of knowledge production and circulation that made RFE one of the most reputed Cold War Knowledge institutions of its time. In my project, I am therefore focusing on the epistemic dimension of RFE in their creation of what I call “Cold War Knowledge”. As RFE’s research had the Cold War as its focus, as it was produced under the ideological framework of the bipolar order within one of its core psychological warfare institutions, and, as by circulation, this research actively reproduced the Cold War, I conceptualize the research output as “Cold War Knowledge”. I hereby follow structuralist sociologists of knowledge such as Berger & Luckmann, Ludwik Fleck, amongst many others, who point to the social constructedness and plurality of many forms of knowledge.

Proponents of the recently burgeoning history of knowledge such as Peter Burke, Philip Sarasin, or Simone Lässig urge us to think beyond knowledge production in academia and to look at all historical configurations of knowledge creation as well as the processes of circulation and translation of that knowledge for various target domains.<sup>19</sup> I also follow the work of historians of “Cold War social sciences” and area studies such as David Engerman, Mark Solovey, Christian Dayé, or Anne Kwaschik, who explore the impact of the Cold War on various fields of scholarly inquiry.<sup>20</sup> In that sense, RFE operated in a liminal space, trying on the hand to produce research that withstood academic rigor, yet on the other hand was accessible enough to be used in effective broadcasts of a “propaganda” radio.

I will shed light on the nexus of the production and circulation of knowledge within one of the core institutions of a highly politicized and ideologized cultural Cold War. Therefore, I will study the first two decades of the institution until 1971, when the CIA cover was blown, and subsequent structural changes of the institution left no stone unturned. I will approach the production of knowledge with these core questions: What was the incentive for a radio broadcaster to create and expand so significantly a research section? What was its institutional place and how did it evolve over time? How did the social dynamics within such a multiethnic institution influence the research processes? Concerning circulation, I ask what channels and modes of giving access to RFE’s research were instituted under which principles? Who were the main users and intended target groups, and for what purposes?

I will approach these questions by analyzing a rich body of institutional documents by US government agencies – archived at the National Archives Record Administration at College Park, Maryland – and most importantly RFE itself, many of the latter only recently released by the Hoover Institution Archives at Stanford University and therefore largely unexplored. These allow the reconstruction of the institutional framework in which RFE’s knowledge production operated. This is amended by personal papers of central actors within and surrounding the institution, collected, for instance, at Georgetown University’s Booth Family Center for Special

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<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, the recent inaugural volume of the *Journal for the History of Knowledge* and here especially Philipp Sarasin: *More Than Just Another Specialty: On the Prospects for the History of Knowledge*, in: *Journal for the History of Knowledge* 1 (1), 2020, online: <http://doi.org/10.5334/jhk.25>.

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Mark Solovey and Christian Dayé (eds.): *Cold War Social Sciences, Transnational Entanglements*, forthcoming with Palgrave Macmillan, to which I have also contributed one chapter. See also Anne Kwaschik: *Der Griff nach dem Weltwissen. Zur Genealogie von Area Studies im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen 2018.

Collections in Washington DC or at Columbia University's Rare Books & Manuscripts Library in New York. Additionally, the research reports themselves, which are administered by the Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives at Central European University in Budapest, inform about the contents and the nature of the produced knowledge. I will show how besides RFE being one of the most important international broadcasters, it did also become one of the prime institutions studying the area of Eastern and Central Eastern Europe during the Cold War.

This thesis speaks to current debates on the epistemic role of media actors and their specific "journalistic" knowledge.<sup>21</sup> RFE was in many ways unique in that it brought together radio broadcasting with "academic" research practices. Focusing on this hitherto neglected epistemic dimension of RFE will therefore not only further our understanding of the institution. It will also introduce a new and central player into current debates on the history of knowledge, of the social sciences, and of area studies research during the Cold War. The project will thus shed light on the praxeology of knowledge production under the impression of the bipolar order and its transsystemic and transnational transfers and circulations in the second half of the 20th century.

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<sup>21</sup> Melanie Fritscher-Fehr: *Demokratie im Ohr: Das Radio als geschichtskultureller Akteur in Westdeutschland, 1945–1963*, Bielefeld 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Kritisch: Volker Hentschel: *Ludwig Erhard. Ein Politikerleben*. Berlin 1998; Werner Abelshauser: *Deutsche Wirtschaftsgeschichte von 1945 bis zur Gegenwart*, Bonn 2011; Uwe Fuhrmann: *Die Entstehung der „Sozialen Marktwirtschaft“ 1948/49. Eine historische Dispositivanalyse*. München 2017; positiver: Alfred C. Mierzejewski: *Ludwig Erhard der Wegbereiter der Sozialen Marktwirtschaft*. München 2005.