

Simple concept, complex nature: German television in the 1930s

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When television started its regular broadcasting service in Germany on 22 March, 1935, the National Socialists celebrated the new technology as proof of German superiority. Creating a national myth by drawing on Paul Nipkow, inventor of a mechanical scanning disk in 1883 and after whom the first television station was named, they claimed television to be a »technical innovation of German spirit«. In line with National Socialist ideology the new technology was not just described as evidence of Aryan supremacy but also conceptualized according to the ruling leader principle [*Führerprinzip*]: In his inaugural address, Reich Program Director Eugen Hadamowsky stated this already well-defined purpose of this new technology clearly: now, in this hour, broadcasting is called upon to fulfill its greatest and most sacred mission: to plant the image of the *Führer* indelibly in all German hearts«.

However, despite of these superficially unambiguous concepts television was quite different form what the National Socialists pretended it was. In my paper I will contrast this simple conception with the multinational, cross-administrative and intermedial nature of German television in the 1930s.

First of all, we know that television was by no means a German invention but rather an international enterprise with a great many inventors contributing to its development. In particular, the opening of the world's first regular television service in Germany goes back to experiments and patents of the multinational (and competing) corporations *Telefunken* and *Fernseh AG*. Not only did the naming of Paul Nipkow mask this international and collaborative invention of television to claim national superiority it also conceals that his scanning disc, once an important device for the development of mechanical television, was already outdated and rendered obsolete by newer inventions.

Secondly, on an institutional level television was the subject matter of power struggles. The Ministry of Propaganda, the Post Ministry and the Air Ministry all competed over the responsibility for the new medium pointing to the vague allocation of tasks that characterizes the National Socialist administration at large. The conflicting interests even led the Propaganda Ministry to believe that the Post Ministry was sabotaging its broadcasts because a number of programs had to be cancelled on short notice due to technical measurements that were performed by the Post Ministry. Although the institutions' relations improved over the course of time, their particular agendas and competing ideas of the new medium affected the nature of television significantly.

Thirdly, these competing ideas included differences about the usage of the new broadcasting technology. While the Propaganda Ministry advocated collective television viewing in *Fernsehstuben* (television parlors) the Post Ministry intended to introduce receivers for private reception very early on. And while Goebbels's Ministry saw television as another medium to spread National Socialist propaganda, the Post Ministry basically wanted to air (>apolitical<) entertainment programs. These different programming concepts resulted in the scheduling of a variety of broadcasts such as Nazi rallies and party events as well as musical shows, television dramas, sports programs or

cooking shows. Thus, far from every program, and in fact very few programs, fulfilled the mission to ›plant the image of the *Führer* indelibly in all German hearts‹.

These different ideas of television's usage are at the core of the very concepts of the medium's identity. We know that after its introduction, early television had an ›identity problem‹, give that its place and function within the existing constellation of media (radio, film, etc.) was not yet clear. Consequently television remediated earlier media, art or entertainment forms by broadcasting vaudeville shows, sports, documentaries, feature films, radio-dramas and television plays. On the other hand live transmissions emerged by and by as a specificity of television. Subsequently this capacity was emphasized and effectively described as the new medium's particular identity, as a result of which German television programs of the 1930s were (and still are) often considered as live broadcasts.

My paper will highlight the contradictions of the simple image that the National Socialists created of the new medium television and its complex nature. Referring to (amongst others) the findings of Elsner/Müller/Spangenberg (1990), Uricchio (1991) and Winkler (1996) I will first describe television's multinational, cross-administrative and uncertain character in more detail. In the second part of my paper I will draw on my own investigation of television programs and discuss their intertextual and intermedial references. Viewing the collection of 1930s television programs at the German *Bundesarchiv* reveals that the new medium not only remediated existing forms, but that it was also involved in the mutual exchange of concrete ›material‹. To name just three examples: when musicians and stage artists presented their acts on television they were sometimes introduced by an announcement of the place of their next stage performance. Well known radio announcers lent their voices to the new medium by announcing sports events or party activities; in doing so they eventually became visible (allowing radio listeners to visualize the hitherto disembodied voice). Film footage was aired, either as short versions of contemporary movies or covertly by integrating recorded images in supposedly live-transmissions (as in the case of a report from the Party Congress 1936 (*Sonderbericht des ›Aktuellen Bilddienstes‹ vom Reichsprteitag 1936*) that uses images of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* which was shot at the 1934 Party Congress).

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