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50 Jahre WDR: Am Puls der Zeit

KLAUS KATZ, DIETRICH LEDER and ULRIKE RIES-AUGUSTIN (EDS)

Köln: Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2006

3 Vols., pp. 1199, illus., index, and appendices, EUR 65.00

The largest public broadcasting station in Germany, and one of the largest in all of Europe, is celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2006. The Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR—West German Broadcasting Station), located in Cologne, emerged as an independent media outlet in 1956 and quickly established itself as a powerful political and cultural force in one of the most populous and economically most prosperous regions of Germany. The station also left a significant mark on the development of German radio and television broadcasting at large. These three beautifully illustrated volumes capture the history of the station in a comprehensive manner. In the preface to the first volume, the editors highlight that they tried “to combine scholarly reliability with an accessible style that would also attract broader audiences.”(pp. 10-11) They have certainly succeeded in these twin goals. In addition, since the first volume deals with the predecessor station of the WDR which began to operate in the early 1920s, the three volumes provide a fascinating and insightful overview of German broadcasting history of the 20th century viewed through the lens of one specific public radio and television station.

Each of the volumes captures one of the key areas of German broadcasting history. Volume 1 (*Die Vorläufer, 1924-1955*) tells the story of the first turbulent decades of radio's development in Germany. The West German Radio Broadcasting Station (Westdeutscher Rundfunk AG, WERAG) started in Münster in 1924 and relocated to Cologne in 1927. Under the leadership of Ernst Hardt, the first director of WERAG, the station quickly blossomed and soon filled 15 hours of daily programming by 1931. It simultaneously emerged as a significant cultural and political presence throughout the Rhineland, Westphalia, and the industrial heartland around the Ruhr River. Like most of broadcasting during the Weimar era, the programs were aimed at the educational and cultural uplift of their audiences and disseminated heavy doses of lectures, dramas, poetry, classical music and operas. At the same time, the station appealed to audiences with light entertainment, sports programming, and by covering the cultural life and local traditions of the regions. As we know from hindsight, it was these latter programs which would represent the most continuous radio fare throughout the century, and ultimately the most successful ones as well.

The Nazi takeover in 1933 did not immediately end the independence of WERAG nor did the Nazi leadership ever completely monopolize the programming. Not surprisingly, however, the establishment of the “Reichssender Köln” in 1934 represented a dramatic reorientation. All Jewish personnel as well as political opponents were removed, a political Nazi stalwart without radio experience (Heinrich Glasmeier) was appointed as new director, and the programming was aligned with a “militarized” Nazi political ideology. Finally, under the motto “More Entertainment, Less Education,” the Nazi broadcasters increased the portion of popular, though “cleansed,” entertainment as early as 1937 and expanded it further during the war years, especially as the tide of war began to turn against Germany.

The post-World War II signaled yet another significant reversal: the Cologne station was subsumed into a new broadcasting unit, the Northwest German Radio Broadcasting station (Nordwest Deutscher Rundfunk), which was located in Hamburg and covered the British occupation zone. Hugh Carleton Green, the renowned BBC broadcaster, took control of the NWDR in 1946 and purposefully modeled the station after the BBC. Greene was particularly interested in establishing this German radio station beyond the control of political parties (“überparteilicher Rundfunk”) to ensure its independence. While he succeeded to a large extent in this goal, Greene could not prevent the increasing tension between the Hamburg and Cologne factions within the station, which escalated in the early 1950s after Greene’s departure. Fighting for every program minute, the Cologne contingent, aided by the forceful leadership of Hans Hartmann as well as powerful local politicians, was able to cut its ties with the NWDR in 1955 and began broadcasting as the independent WDR in 1956.

The second volume (*Der Sender: Weltweit, Nah Dran, 1956-1985*) focuses on the rather steady growth and increasing power of the WDR during what might well be labeled the golden age of West German public broadcasting. Unchallenged by private competition and endowed with fixed fees from rapidly increasing rates of radio and TV ownership, the WDR expanded and experimented at its heart’s desire. This uninterrupted growth hit the first significant bump in the early 1970s when the saturation of the media market halted increases generated from fees and forced stations like the WDR to cut programming and staff for the first time in its postwar history. Nevertheless, the main direction was guided by growth and expansion. In the mid-1950s, 3.5 million radios and only a few thousand TVs were registered in the WDR broadcasting region, generating fee revenues of about 100 million DM. By 1985, 6.5 million registered radios and nearly as many television sets swelled the WDR budget, creating a total revenue of nearly 1 billion DM.

Television was introduced in West Germany in the early 1950s; by the early 1960s it became a serious competitor to radio. The WDR quickly expanded its TV programs in collaboration with other public broadcasting stations and contributed to West Germany’s first TV channel (Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, ARD). It also added the all-important Channel 3 (WDR 3) for local TV programming in the mid-1960s. Within the ARD, the WDR established its reputation through political, sports, and entertainment programs. For example, the WDR oversaw the ARD-studio in Bonn and produced important domestic and international news broadcasts like *Monitor* or *Der Weltspiegel*. In addition, a roundtable discussion by international journalists hosted by Werner Höfer (*Internationaler Frühschoppen*) became standard fare for millions of Germans every Sunday morning. Even more successful was the WDR-produced *Sportschau*, a program that highlighted and analyzed the games of West Germany’s premier soccer league (Bundesliga) every Saturday evening. Radio broadcasting also remained successful during much this era. Although still focused on education and edification, and largely neglecting the public demand for increased popular entertainment programming, the WDR build up newly available FM channels into distinct and more focused programs.

Beginning in the early 1970s, however, the Cologne station was shaken up by three unrelated, yet mutually reinforcing, crises: as mentioned earlier, the West German

demand for radio and TV sets was largely saturated, which led to a stagnation of fee revenues; secondly, private radio stations like RTL, a commercial broadcaster located in Luxemburg, began to take a big bite out of the WDR's audiences, especially among its young listeners; and third, the WDR was developing a reputation as a "red station" ("Rotfunk") because it dared to display more investigative journalism and cultural openness than most regional outlets. While the new approach energized the producers of both radio and TV programs and created many memorable programs, the economic stagnation and increasing political pressure put the WDR, still the largest in West Germany, temporarily on the defensive.

Volume 3 (*Der Sender im Wettbewerb, 1985-2005*) highlights the third major era of German broadcasting history after the introduction of private media in 1985. The dual system ("duales System"), as it became known, exposed public broadcasting to full-scale competition of commercial media stations and presented (and continues to present) the most significant challenge German public broadcasting has had to face in the past 60 years. Although the WDR, like other German public broadcasting stations, at first responded sluggishly to the newly arising competition, it eventually made some painful adjustments and, in the last decade, has actually regained ground previously lost to private competitors.

It is important to note that the WDR is not in an outright head-to-head competition with private stations. In 1991, the German Supreme Court guaranteed both the public stations' right to exist and their desire to expand. Yet the Court also committed public broadcasting stations like the WDR to ensuring a basic level of programming for the diverse needs and audiences. The fee structure secures the future for public broadcasting, yet it also mandates a public service obligation that commercial stations do not have to meet.

While stations like the WDR are still powerful political forces and tremendously significant regional cultural institutions, they are engaged in a fierce competition with private stations in the entertainment sector especially. The low point for public television came in the mid-1990s when the viewership of the first broadcasting channel (ARD) declined to 14 percent. More recently, however, national and regional public TV broadcasting channels have recuperated somewhat and won back audiences by emphasizing regional coverage, even if these successes in television often came through gains among commercially less desirable, older viewers. In contrast, public radio broadcasting has been far more successful for the Cologne station after the WDR's radio broadcasting channels went through a complete make-over in the 1990s. The new youth-oriented station "EinsLive," for example, has recaptured vast segments of young radio audiences and is currently the most popular station among 14-29 year-old listeners in the region.

The shortcomings of a comprehensive survey, even when it is told in three volumes, are probably unavoidable. The biggest one from my perspective is that anyone looking for extensive discussions and analyses of specific radio and TV programs will most likely be disappointed. While some are rather extensively covered, especially the political shows and programs of the WDR from the late 1960s through the 1980s, the

majority of entertainment programs and series are discussed in a far more cursory manner.

At the same time, there is also no way to adequately represent the richness of the three volumes in a short review like this. It is worth mentioning, for example, that each volume contains extensive chapters on the technical innovations during the respective time periods. Brief chapters at the end of each volume additionally discuss the marketing and public relations side of the broadcasting station. Hundreds of images and reproductions, as well as dozens of biographical inserts of some of the most significant leaders of the WDR further illuminate this history and are likely to engage scholars and general audiences alike. In general, this collaboration between dozens of independent researchers and station insiders has produced a highly readable, integrated, and comprehensive three-volume study and provides a significant new addition to the field of media history and communication studies. Both the editors and contributors can be proud of their accomplishment.

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