

The Historian, Television and Television History



Edited by
Graham Roberts
and Philip M Taylor

The Historian, Television and Television History

A collection edited by Graham Roberts and
Philip M. Taylor in honour of Nicholas
Pronay

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The History of Television through the Internet: A few notes on the project www.histv.net

André Lange

History of television is progressively becoming an academic discipline. There is no doubt about the fact that it will become a major field of investigation for understanding the second half of the 20th century. Resources for such a discipline are however still scarce and fragmented. From this observation, I decided to create a website on the History of Television that may become a focal point for researchers and students, but also for the large public, interested by this emerging field.

At the origin, the project was a modest one: in charge of a lecture at the Free University of Brussels (ULB) and living in Strasbourg, I thought that a website could be a good communication tool with students. The initial website, opened in February 1999, was a bit rough with a lot of technical mistakes and content reduced to some articles and bibliographical notes. Two events decided me to make something more ambitious from this initial modest project. The first one was the almost miraculous discovery in an *alfarabist* (a book antiquarian) in Porto of the very first brochure published on the project of seeing at distance: *La télescope électrique basée sur l'emploi du sélénium*, published (in French, Portuguese and English) in 1880 by the Portuguese Professor Adriano de Paiva.

The second event was the fact that the site had been selected by the Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie – the leading French Museum of Education to Sciences – as one of the 50 best educational websites in French for the exhibition in the year 2000 'Plaisir d'apprendre'. With a slow and delayed start the French internet was in 1999 – and still is to a large extent in 2000 – looking for good content in the education area. To be selected together with the Bibliothèque Nationale, L'Musée de l'Homme, the IRCAM and a couple of other highly public supported cultural and educational institutions was an exciting challenge for a hobby-like project .

This is a short description of the content of the site (which is divided into 5 parts).

The introduction (only in French) introduces various aspects of the history of television (the history of television as technological system, a political and social history of television, cultural history, the history of television creators and the history of television works).

For the English-speaking reader the 'On-line anthology of early texts on television' will be the most accessible, as it contains a lot of texts originally published in English or translated into English.

Complementary to the anthology is the section: 'Questions d'histoire de la télévision' (also only in French). This area introduces several articles on some moments in the history of television, in particular on the period prior to the World War II, that are not necessarily well known.

The 'Mary Néant project' found the origin of its title in some lines of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. In Joyce's text, television – as I understand it – is called 'Mary Nothing'. I liked the Philippe Lavergne's translation in French as 'Mary Néant'. This part of the site (far from being completed) is a research project on the television in its relation to the other arts. You will find in it quotations of television by writers such as Jules Verne, HG Wells, Mark Twain, Marcel Proust and F.T. Marinetti. There are also some articles and references to relations between dance and television, television and graphic arts, not to forget television making with reference to television.

The 'Resources' section offers 120 pages of bibliography on research in mass communication, the history of television in its various aspects and a lot of links to interesting sites.

The most developed part of the website is the 'Anthology of early texts on television.' This includes the reproduction of more than 100 texts published before 1900 on the project of 'far-seeing.'

There are at least two excellent reference books on the early technological developments of television: A. Abramson, *The History of Television, 1880-1941*, (Mac Farland & Company, Inc. Publishers, Jefferson, North Carolina and London, 1987) and R.W. Burns *Television – an international history of the formative years*, (IEE/Peregrinus, London, 1998). The two books have been my companions for establishing my collection of early texts on television. Both are written by engineers – one American, the other English – who did an exceptional work of identification of patents and scientific publications, related to publications. Both books have such a level of erudition that they could discourage anybody to undertake further research. However, my attention was drawn to the fact that Abramson's reference to De Paiva's brochure was second hand and a bit imprecise. Getting my own copy of this

brochure was like possessing some treasure to share. Which I did by reproducing it in JPEG pictures on my site.

The De Paiva brochure is a quite curious publication: as early as 1878, De Paiva, a Professor of Physics at the University of Porto, published articles in scientific Portuguese publications on the possibility of using selenium to transmit pictures through electricity. He was the first to formulate this proposal, but he never really experimented with it. The final statement of De Paiva is quite prophetic of the world wired society:

'With these two marvellous instruments [telephone and telectroscope], fixed on one spot of the globe, man will be able to extend to the whole of it, his visual and auditory faculties. Ubiquity, from having been utopian, will become perfect reality. Then, conducting wires charged with all important missions will cross and recross at the surface of the earth; they will be the mysterious duets which will bring to the observer the impressions received by artificial organs, which human genius has made to compass any distance. And, just as the complexity of nervous filaments can give an idea of the superior perfection of an animal, those metallic filaments, nerves of another order, will testify to the high degree of civilization of the monster organism – humanity.'

De Paiva's idea was rapidly picked up by other scientists in the world, including the French notaire Constantin Senlecq who is generally hailed – at least in France – as one of the first fathers of the television project. His brochure published in 1880 was nothing else than a claim of paternity, providing evidences and press articles to defend the priority of the idea. In a sense, it is the first publication of the history of television.

I rapidly became aware of the fact that both Abramson and Burns had not identified all the existing early contributions on television. Probably because they are English-speakers, they did not fully investigate the French-speaking and also German-speaking publications. The discovery in the library of Strasbourg University of another brochure by the Austrian Major Benedict Schöffler, *Die Phototelegraphie und das Elektrische Fernsehen* (Wilhelm Braumüller, Wien und Leipzig, 1898) convinced me that a more systematic investigation could reveal further lost contributions. And there were indeed many. After one year of investigation the collection of texts has grown to more than 100 references, making a total of more than 300 html pages of documents in French, Portuguese, English, German, Italian, Spanish and Russian.

The project is not completed yet. The collection of notices is still to be finalised, as well as the analysis of the process of scientific communication leading to the final invention of a 'true' television. But this work in progress already provides – I hope – a first and unique tool for researchers, lecturers and students in the history of television. It also demonstrates how the Internet can change academic historical research and scientific collaboration.

I would like to stress here the role and the importance of the Internet in constituting my collection of texts and creating a network of very efficient correspondents.

The first progress is of course in the incredibly easier access to library treasures through the Internet. Not only are catalogues accessible from home, the order of photocopies has become simple and also some very rare texts are directly accessible. A special mention should be awarded to the 'Gallica' website of the French Bibliothèque Nationale, which makes possible direct access to publications of the 18th and 19th century such as the *Gipbantie de Tiphaigne de la Roche*, *Ignis* by Didier de Chousy, or popular science publications such as *Le Magasin pittoresque* or Louis Figuier's *L'Année scientifique et industrielle*, not to mention the proceedings of the Académie des Sciences. Accessing those texts directly from home, without the costly stand-by in the Bibliothèque Nationale, is an incredible change in the holistic phases.

The Internet has also allowed me to identify rapidly a number of correspondents sharing the same interest for early television. Not only did they encourage me in the project but they also helped me to identify new sources and new texts. Professor Vaz Guedes from the University of Porto provided me with useful material on De Paiva; Karl Beneke, a researcher in the chemistry of celluloid at the University of Kiel, provided me with original information and documents on Raphael Edward Liesegang, the German author of the first book on television and the creator of the German word *Fernsehen*. Jim Zwick, the editor of a wonderful site on Mark Twain, pointed me to the unexpected texts by Mark Twain on Jan Szczepanik, the 'Austrian Edison', inventor of the teleelectroscope. I should also mention the friendly contribution of Russell Naughton, from Melbourne University, editor of the site 'Adventures in Cybersound', which, amongst others things, found the astonishing texts by Frank Parsons and Samuel Golden Rule Jones on the future political uses of the teleelectroscope ('The world will be at our feet'). Those 1899 contributions, probably the first political texts on television, were identified by Russell on the site of the Toledo University, thanks to a powerful search tool. Melvin Rees from the Patent Office spend some time in finding the forgotten W. Gemill 1886 patent on tele-photography, apparently the first one in the world dedicated to a system of 'far-seeing'. Geraldine D'Unger was so happy to find, thanks again to a powerful search tool, a one-line quotation about the 'telephot' of her grand-father Robert D'Unger (a physician better know as Edgar Allen Poe's doctor), that she sent me original material and pictures. Last but not least, the web allowed me to discover and contact the Scottish engineer Don MacLean who has restored and edited on his website (<http://www.dfm.dircon.co.uk>) the recording of television in 30 lines of John Logie Baird. I was so admiring of Don's work that I translated his site in French in exchange for the right to reproduce the elegant 'Realplayer' picture of Betty Bolton singing for the BBC camera around 1932-1935. I cannot imagine that the pre-Internet academic life could have allowed me to contact so rapidly and precisely such precious and passionate fellows.

The site has rapidly reached the point that I found astonishing myself: more than 15,000 visitors in one year. In August 2000, more than 30 per cent of visitors were from the US, 19 per cent from France, 5 per cent from Australia, 2 per cent from Canada and less than 4 per cent from Belgium. So, I am not quite sure that my students of the University of Brussels are really using the site. The mails I receive from them indicate the perplexity of people in their 20's when confronted with the concept of the history of television. Most of them claim not to watch television – they are students in Film studies and share the French dominant view that cinema is everything and television nothing – and complain about the difficulties of computer access in the University library. I received messages indicating that the site reaches other publics than the target Belgian students: television workers, journalists, children (looking for *the* inventor of television), but also students from France, Canada or North Africa asking for further information. The site is indexed in other academic sites in Belgium, France, UK and US, but also in Canada, in Germany, in Russia, in Spain, in Peru, in Australia. Cultural websites and sites by TV-series fans also link to it, indicating that the academic approach to the history of television transcends the boundaries of the University.

The number of websites in English that are dedicated to the history of television confirms the general interest in this field. They include some academic contributions, but also a quite important number of 'amateur' contributions specialising in the biographical approach to some inventors, dedication to some national or local television company, or the most classical 'fans pages' on a specific series or serial. Strangely enough, the television websites are quite poor on historical material. To my knowledge, RAI is the only European TV company providing archive pictures through the web (<http://www.teche.rai.it>), going back to the announcement of the election of the 3rd President of the Republic, Giovanni Gronchi, in 1955. The transfer of archive pictures on Real Player does not provide excellent quality of picture, but at least some of the substance of the television from the 1950s to the 1990s is there.

The historian of television, for whom access to the archives remains difficult, would like to see this kind of anthology becoming more general and, of course, of a better technical quality. It is doubtful however that the publication of TV archives on the Internet will soon become a general practice: copyright issues, not to speak of the technical costs, will still be the major obstacle for on-line transmission of such material. As the reissue of TV historical material on video remains limited to some basic cult series, it is not difficult to bet that the access to archives will remain for a long time the privilege of a small number of researchers. A country like France has taken a major initiative with the creation of the Inathèque, providing access to a vast amount of digitalised TV archives, but in a small country like Belgium, where the current television system is in a financial turmoil, the creation of a true system of access is only becoming a structured academic claim, as illustrated by the first conference on the History of television that was organised in October 2000 by the Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve.

The Internet as a tool for the history of television is then a paradox: as you cannot use illustrated material – video or still picture – still under copyright protection, you have as the only solution to come back to the written text, JPEG pictures of old scientific magazines in the public domain. You couldn't possibly cover the pre-history of television like this, but it is clear that only major projects with strong funding could propose a sophisticated use of the Internet for using the new medium as a fruitful historical instrument of the true period of television, the second half of the 20th century. In a sense, my fear is that the television organisations will take care of this themselves, without the support of historians or of researchers in mass communication. With a few exceptions, the existing TV programmes on television history have been or are quite disappointing, from a critical point of view. They more often flatter viewers' nostalgia rather than providing enlightenment on the past. The broadcasters' strategy towards the Internet is still unclear, but using the Net to write a critical and documented history of television is obviously the last topic on the agenda. But who knows? In 1900, the French electrician M. Mascart, when opening the International Congress of Electricity in the Paris Exhibition – where the word 'television' had been coined for the first time by the Russian Constantin Perskyi – said that it would probably be indiscreet to ask electricity to transmit pictures. Would it be indiscreet to ask big sister television to use the Benjamin medium for helping us to write her own critical history, and the history of half a century?