

Research Access to the German Broadcasting Heritage. A Short Introduction to the Archival Landscape of the German Broadcasters ARD and Deutschlandradio

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Are you a researcher and are looking for an overview of German radio and television coverage on your research topic? Are you interested in radio and television reports by specific journalists, cinematographers, or other media professionals from the last 100 years? Are you working on a comparative study of broadcasting in East and West Germany during the Cold War and are still looking for relevant sources? Then you need access to the German broadcasting heritage, and to the archives of public broadcasting.

In Germany, there are private broadcasters, mostly financed by advertising, as well as public broadcasters, financed by fees. This system, which is also called the “dual principle,” dates to the early eighties, when an increasing number of private broadcasting companies were established.² The prominence of public broadcasting distinguishes the German media landscape from the U.S., where radio and television programs are often produced by commercial providers.

One of the key features of the public broadcasting system in Germany is its federal structure. Each federal state has its own state broadcasting institution, each with its own competencies. In some cases, two or more federal states jointly operate a broadcasting institution, such as Rundfunk Berlin Brandenburg. A total of nine broadcasters broadcast radio and television programs for their respective regions.³ In addition, a joint supra-regional television program operates within the framework of ARD, the Association of German Broadcasting Corporations: Das Erste or Das Erste Deutsche Fernsehen.

Part of ARD is the international broadcaster Deutsche Welle, which produces a multilingual radio and television program for various target groups in other countries. Independent from ARD, but also organized under public law, are the nationwide broadcasters Deutschlandradio, with a total of three national radio programs, and Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF). Today, all broadcasters provide digital programs and services complementing their regular radio or television programs.

The diversity of broadcasters is also reflected by the archives of the individual stations. Each of the public broadcasting companies maintains its own archive. These archives contain not only the surviving radio and television broadcasts from the program, but also sources that provide additional contextual information, such as written material, photographs, and material objects. In addition to documentation of the broadcasting company’s institutional history, the archives also include collections about specific program, including, for example, letters to the editor. As sources of contemporary history, such letters provide insight into the impact of radio and television on its viewers. Donated manuscript collections from important personalities in

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² See: Schwarzkopf, Dietrich, „Die “Medienwende” 1983,“ in: Schwarzkopf (ed.), Rundfunkpolitik in Deutschland. Wettbewerb und Öffentlichkeit, vol.1 (Munich: dtv, 1999): 29-49.

³ This includes the Bayerische Rundfunk (BR), Hessische Rundfunk (HR), Mitteldeutsche Rundfunk (MDR), Norddeutsche Rundfunk (NDR), Radio Bremen, Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg (RBB), Saarländische Rundfunk (SR), Südwestdeutsche Rundfunk (SWR) and the Westdeutsche Rundfunk (WDR).

broadcasting history, and other special collections, such as sheet music for live music broadcasts from broadcasting concert halls, also have their place in these archives.⁴

A special feature in the network of public broadcasting archives is the German Broadcasting Archive (DRA), a foundation jointly supported by ARD and Deutschlandradio, with two locations – in Frankfurt am Main and in Potsdam-Babelsberg. The DRA's main focus is on the broadcasting collections from the Weimar Republic (1923-1933), National Socialism (1933-1945) and the radio and television of the German Democratic Republic (1945-1990). The DRA's collections therefore represent an important addition to the holdings of the archives of the public broadcasters, documenting the historical development of broadcasting in Germany as a whole. German broadcasting history now spans over more than 100 years, and was shaped by political transformations and two forms of dictatorship, Nazi Germany and the GDR.⁵

The fact that public broadcasting exists at all in the Federal Republic of Germany today is primarily due to National Socialism and the Allied occupation following World War II: During the Nazi era, centralized broadcasting was an important propaganda tool, a development that the allied powers strove to rule out after the end of the war. Based on the model of the British BBC, the Western occupying powers introduced a public broadcasting service: a service that operates independently from the state, is publicly financed (by all citizens), has a federal rather than a centralized structure, and that has an educational mandate in line with democratic principles. This is a model that was continued and expanded after the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949 and has essentially survived until today.⁶

In the Soviet occupation zone, broadcasting was initially under the control of the Soviet Military Administration following the end of World War II. After the establishment of the GDR in 1949, state-controlled broadcasting was introduced, which lasted for several decades, until the fall of the Berlin Wall. In this respect, the unification of East and West Germany also led to groundbreaking changes in broadcasting policy. The GDR's broadcasting system was dissolved. In the new federal states in the territory of the former GDR, new broadcasting stations were established, or the regions were included in the broadcasting areas of existing West German broadcasting stations.⁷

The establishment of Deutschlandradio, the only nationwide public radio station, was also a result of Germany's unification in 1989/1990. Both Rundfunk im amerikanischen Sektor (RIAS Berlin), which was founded during the American occupation, and Deutschlandfunk, which was founded in the 1960s as a German response to propaganda radio measures by the GDR, and finally Deutschlandsender Kultur (DS Kultur), which emerged from the GDR's radio station during the fall of communism, were transferred to a new national radio station in 1994: Deutschlandradio. Therefore, today's Deutschlandradio archive includes not only its own programming assets, but also the records of the three predecessor stations.

Scholars who are interested in the history of German broadcasting today, or who are hoping to access the German broadcasting heritage for a variety of research projects, will therefore not

⁴ See: Behmer, Markus/Bernard, Birgit/Hasselbring, Bettina (eds.), *Das Gedächtnis des Rundfunks. Die Archive der öffentlich-rechtlichen Sender und ihre Bedeutung für die Forschung* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2013).

⁵ See: Dethlefs, Friedrich. „Ein Archiv für Tonaufnahmen. Geschichte und Bestände des Deutschen Rundfunkarchivs – Ein Überblick,“ in: *Archivnachrichten aus Hessen* 20:1 (2020): 36-41.

⁶ See: Glässgen, Heinz, „Im öffentlichen Interesse. Einführung,“ in: Glässgen (ed.), *Im öffentlichen Interesse. Auftrag und Legitimation des öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunks* (Leipzig: Vistas, 2015): 11-19.

⁷ For an overview of the German (East-and West) broadcasting history, see: Dussel, Konrad, *Deutsche Rundfunkgeschichte*, third rev. edition (Konstanz: UVK, 2010).

only encounter the parallel structure of private and public broadcasters, but also a network of different broadcasting archives distributed throughout Germany.

Since 2014, however, this distributed archival landscape has become more accessible through a uniform access regulation for the archives of ARD, Deutschlandradio and ZDF. Since then, the public broadcasters have voluntarily committed themselves to opening their archives for academic research. Since 2021, the DRA has also taken on a coordinating and advisory role to simplify access to the holdings of ARD and Deutschlandradio. The DRA is available to assist with general and specific research inquiries, including advice on how to access the different collections, or with sharing contact information for specialists in the ARD and Deutschlandradio archives. The DRA is also the first point of contact if you are interested in researching in the holdings of several institutions. However, if you are specifically interested in researching in the holdings of one of the public broadcasters, you are welcome to contact these archives directly. Just as at the DRA, an academic research liaison in each archive of the broadcasting corporations will assist you with your inquiry.

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Translation into English by Katharina Hering.

Links

Regulations on research and academic access to the archives of ARD, Deutschlandradio and ZDF, contact persons and FAQs:

<https://www.ard.de/die-ard/wie-sie-uns-erreichen/Archivzugang-fuer-Wissenschaft-und-Forschung-100>

Web presentation of the German Broadcasting Archive with information about holdings and access options:

<https://www.dra.de>

Website of the Historical Commission of the ARD with information on the history of public service broadcasting in Germany:

<https://historische-kommission.ard.de>

Further reading

Behmer, Markus/Bernard, Birgit/Hasselbring, Bettina (eds). Das Gedächtnis des Rundfunks. Die Archive der öffentlich-rechtlichen Sender und ihre Bedeutung für die Forschung. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2013.

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