

Echo der Zeit : a radio programme becomes a legend

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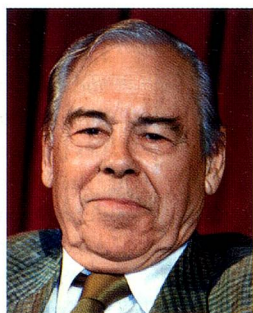
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A radio programme becomes a legend Sixty years ago, the first "Echo der Zeit" ("News Echo") was broadcast on Swiss radio. For many Swiss Abroad, too, the "Echo" is a trusted source of daily news. By Rolf Ribi

Whenever 88-year-old Heiner Gautschy walks the streets of Zurich's old town in halting steps, elderly people recognise and greet him. And when the old man leaning on his walking stick enters the Kantorei restaurant, diners fall silent. Those who know him are aware that he is the best-known legend in the history of Swiss radio. For 19 years, from 1949 to 1968, "This is Heiner Gautschy in New York" heralded the start of the evening "Echo der Zeit" news programme.

This year, the best-known and most popular news programme of German and Rhaetoromansh Switzerland (Radio DRS) has itself become a legend: sixty years ago, on 17 September 1945, the first "Echo der Zeit" was broadcast. Small wonder, then, that Heiner Gautschy is currently much in demand for TV and radio interviews.

With an uninterrupted run of sixty years, "Echo der Zeit" is believed to be the world's longest-running radio programme. In all this time, neither the basic format nor the name



Radio veteran Heiner Gautschy

has changed. Day after day, an average of 700 000 listeners tune in to the latest news, and every month some 100 000 people log on to the Internet to read the reports and analyses. Despite competition from numerous local radio stations, this programme commands almost 47 percent of the listening market on DRS 1 and a good 13 percent on DRS 2.

"Echo der Zeit" is one of the unique products to which Radio DRS owes its continued existence," says Christoph Gebel, Head of Programming at DRS 1.

To celebrate this success story, Hanspeter Gschwend has recently published a book entitled "Echo der Zeit. Weltgeschehen am Radio" (see footnote), which has already rocketed to the top of the non-fiction best-seller list. The book documents the history of "Echo", describes former landmark articles, and discusses current questions on the journalistic concept of this programme (this article is largely based on the book).

"Echo" over the years

In its early years after the launch of "Echo" in 1945, the main topics were World War Two and its consequences. The programme still had no clear concept. The role of radio was debated in public, and the Federal Council even wanted to use the medium for political ends. In the 1950s more broadcasting time was given to political issues and, in particular, foreign affairs, and as radio increasingly became a news medium, a network of foreign correspondents was built up.

In 1968, when Russian troops entered Prague, "Echo" gained a new lease of life. The small team of editorial staff broadcast 20 special programmes and brought listeners live reports from the Czech short-wave channel. New journalists of the likes of Raul Lautenschütz, Rolf Pellegrini, Alfred Defago, Hanspeter Born and Peter Métraux added a livelier, more up-to-date dimension to "Echo". Correspondents such as Heiner Gautschy, Hans O. Staub, Theodor Haller and Anne-marie Schwyter, as well as occasional reporters posted abroad, studio guests and editorial staff made their mark on the new "Echo der Zeit".

As Head of National Broadcasting, Alfred Defago turned the "Samstagsrundschau" programme into an attractive podium and secured a permanent place in "Echo" for domestic affairs. At the end of the 1970s, highly competent editors in the persons of Alexander Gschwind, Caspar Selg and Robert Stähli joined the programme.



The Echo der Zeit editorial team – l to r Monika Oettli, Annelise Tenisch, Martin Dürer, Brigitte Zingg, Tina Herren, Anita Richner, Caspar Selg (producer

of «Echo»), Anna Trechsel, Fredy Gsteiger and Franco Battel – photographed on Tuesday 20 September 2005 during a special live broadcast from the Museum for

Communication in Berne, where the programme celebrated its 60th anniversary.

At the initiative of Director of Radio Andreas Blum, a new lunchtime and evening slot was introduced in 1984. "Echo der Zeit" provided background information on selected topical issues. When the number of listeners of evening DRS 1 programmes dropped as a result of competition from private broadcasters, the Director of Radio took the bull by the horns: The regional news programme was expanded, the magazines were retained, and "Echo" was broadcast on all three channels at staggered intervals. Consistent with this move, a single programme was created by merging the magazine as the news element and "Echo der Zeit" as the medium for background information.

In 1999 the new Director of Radio, Walter Rüttig, spearheaded a move to adjust programming to the financial situation and to market needs. "My plans are prompted by considerations of reach and market share." After years of falling audience numbers, the DRS 1 news channel as well as Radio DRS as a whole enjoyed a turnaround, and to this day remain the market leaders.

Kennedy's assassination

Heiner Gautschi was the first correspondent in New York to work exclusively for Radio Beromünster. At 13:00 on Friday 22 November 1963, he had just broadcast to Berne an "Echo" article on "Washington and the change in Cambodia" from his apartment. At 13:40 a Swiss colleague in New York alerted him to switch on the TV. What Gautschi witnessed shook the entire world: the assassination of President Kennedy. At 20:30 Gautschi first tried calling the producer of "Echo" in Berne, but to no avail. Only at 21:17 did the headline announce the first report from Gautschi, who described the events of the day in muted and sombre tones. Over the next few days Gautschi was continually on the air.

Heiner Gautschi wrote radio history with his reports on Kennedy's assassination. But for three different reasons, "Echo der Zeit" performed less than brilliantly: The news agency should have immediately included the event in its news bulletins; it should have been in a position to relay the information quickly to its colleagues at "Echo; and the policy of dividing the world into studio regions (with correspondents reporting to "their" studio) proved a mistake.

"National" versus "international"

There are two fundamental questions which repeatedly occupy the management and staff of "Echo der Zeit": the ratio of domestic affairs to international affairs, and in particular the programme's basic journalistic concept.

Until the 1970s "Echo der Zeit" reported almost exclusively on foreign affairs. New pro-

grammes such as "Von Tag zu Tag" in 1957 and "„Rendez-vous am Mittag" in 1968 gave more air time to domestic affairs. But parliamentary reports tended to come over as a court correspondent's report, and the editor at the time felt himself to be "between God and the Houses of Parliament".

It was Alfred Defago, appointed head of national programmes in 1973, who built up the editorial team for domestic affairs and succeeded in integrating national news in "Echo der Zeit" (Defago was later appointed Swiss ambassador to Washington). From then on the programme's mandate was to provide a realistic picture of Swiss politics through direct contact with political actors.

But the new emphasis on "domestic affairs" instilled mistrust in the "foreign correspondents" at "Echo der Zeit". They believed Swiss politicians were incapable of discussing foreign policy issues. Moreover, there was mutual mistrust of ideologies: the "Left" of international news reporting versus the "Right" of domestic affairs reporting. But Defago had firmly embedded national news reporting in "Echo der Zeit" and throughout Radio DRS.

Over the years more and more air time was devoted to domestic issues, and disputes over ideological positions were largely consigned to history. Instead, the trend was in another direction: Nowadays international news is having a harder time competing against domestic affairs. Nevertheless, "Echo" producer Casper Selg does not want to see domestic affairs benefiting at the cost of international affairs: "In a country with such close links to the rest of the world, we must inform listeners on global affairs as comprehensively and comprehensibly as possible."

Information and entertainment

The manual entitled "Informationsjournalismus bei Schweizer Radio DRS" (News Journalism at the Swiss Radio Station DRS) outlines the broadcasting corporation's obligation to report facts truthfully and fairly, to investigate critically, and to maintain distance from persons in power and lobbyists. The key criteria are objectivity, transparency and comprehensibility. Tabloid journalism and "infotainment" (information with entertainment) have no place here. As media critic Neil Postman once said, "Entertainment deprives infor-

mation of its political and cultural content." According to Casper Selg, "We select issues primarily on the basis of their relevance rather than their popular appeal".

The precedent was set for the "Echo" team in 1997 on the death of Diana, the divorced wife of Britain's Crown Prince, Charles. The drama unfolded in the early hours of Sunday, and at the time there was no edition of "Echo" on Sundays. What to report on Monday? The "Echo" team of editors was in two minds: the quality standards of the programme's makers had to be honoured, yet the way the event had affected people, even in Switzerland, had to be considered. The dilemma remained insoluble. Ultimately the "right" angle was: What are the reasons behind this type of collective grief?

If the death of Princess Diana set a precedent, the case of Federal Councillor candidate Christiane Brunner was clearly a wrong decision: Shortly before the parliamentary election for a new Federal Councillor, anonymous groups threatened to publish a defamatory dossier on the National Councillor for Geneva (including a nude photograph). Mention by "Echo der Zeit" of this threat and the alleged photos contributed to the failure of Brunner's candidacy, and was a clear violation of her rights to privacy. "Privacy is a highly protected right under law, and we should never have done what we did," declared editor-in-chief Marco Färber subsequently.

What is the journalistic Zeitgeist – infotainment and acceptance, or sobriety and relevance, more reports on everyday domestic affairs or more global information? The debate about the contemporary image of "Echo der Zeit" is far from over. For Colette Gradwohl, Head of the Information Department, however, one thing is sure: "The importance of personalities like Heiner Gautschi or Annemarie Schwyter is a thing of the past."

Hanspeter Gschwend: "Echo der Zeit" – international news on radio, with recordings on audio CD, 2005 Neue Zürcher Zeitung, CHF 48, EUR 33

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