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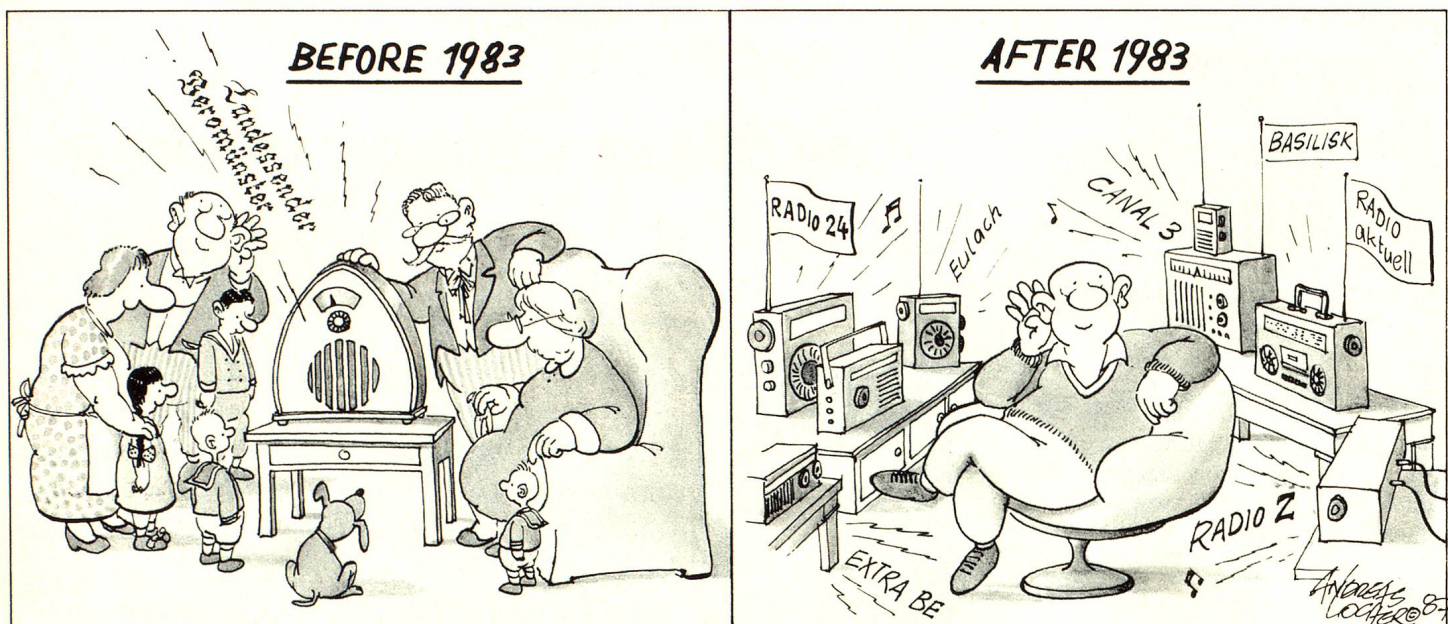
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Local radio in Switzerland

Private transmitters legal

For three years now, it has been possible to tune in to the programmes of local radio transmitters in Switzerland, in addition to those of the national and foreign broadcasting stations. That, today, private radio stations in Winterthur, Lausanne and Bellinzona may legally put their programmes on the air, is the outcome of a long dispute.

Until a few years ago the Swiss authorities used to go «pirate hunting». They did not pick on wild buccaneers but rather on ordinary citizens who happened to possess a radio transmitter. These radio pirates were a thorn in the flesh of the powers-that-be, because some of them transmitted their own programmes – illegally. Only the national radio and TV broadcasting company (SRG) had the right to go on the air.

Since November 1983 things have been different. Some thirty private radio broadcasting companies have been able to operate their stations in town and country quite legally. This change in media policy is to some extent due to the success of the «radio pirate» Roger Schawinsky who, for months, broadcast music, news and commercials into Zurich from Pizzo Groppera in Italy. When his «Radio 24» was closed down, at Switzerland's request, there were noisy protests from the listeners. Then, also people from fringe areas and some small political groupings (who likewise felt they

were being treated in stepmotherly fashion by the SRG) as well as even a part of the business world started to press for a liberalization of the electronic media.

Trial phase until 1988

The government agreed to give private radio a trial and granted 36 out of the 214 applications for licences submitted, within the framework of a *Rundspruchversuchsverordnung* (RVO), a radio trial ordinance. Although advertising stations aiming at light entertainment predominate, today the spectrum of the various private transmitters is wide, in regard to content. And, lately, Switzerland has even acquired a few «alternative» broadcasting stations operated by minority groups. The transmitter with the smallest circle of listeners is the Zurich «Radio Riesbach», which broadcasts only for the city district of that name. However, the enlarged choice of programmes has by no means turned the Swiss into a united people of local radio fans. Although large

parts of the population accept the new stations (and sometimes turn them on) there were, and still are, also critics. Cultural circles, trade unions and some political parties who fear an increase in light entertainment put up resistance – without success – to the privatisation of radio in Switzerland. The old argument has flared up again as a result of the demand for an early decision to allow also local television stations.

Bonus: local information

That local radio stations can be not only entertaining but also useful has become clear to at least a part of Switzerland since the Sandoz conflagration. When, on 1st November, shortly after five o'clock in the morning, the sirens began to wail and an acrid smell permeated the bedrooms of the startled Baslers, Radio Basilisk, the local radio station of Basle, was the only transmitter which continuously broadcast information about the chemical disaster and the poison cloud over the region. For

technical reasons the national transmitters could not accomplish their information mission at the time in question.

Christine Valentin

Green light for a trial

cv. In 1982 the Swiss Federal Council issued the RVO (Rundfunkversuchsverordnung – radio trial statutory regulation), thus creating for the first time a legal basis for the operation of private radio stations. At the same time, it gave the go-ahead for a five-year experimental operation of 36 local broadcasting transmitters to be financed by members' contributions or advertising, or both. The information brief of the private radio stations was defined in broad outlines and the local broadcasting range was fixed.

The proportion and kind of advertising, the maximum rates for commercials and the circumstances of owner-relationship of the licensed operators are also regulated by the RVO. To avoid any publicistic hegemony, financial participation by newspaper publishers in local radio stations is in principle forbidden – a provision which, however, has in the meantime been relaxed because of the financial difficulties of individual stations. After the end of the trial period, which lasts until 1988, the RVO is to be superseded by a new radio and television act.



FM 96.0 MHz

Radio Matterhorn

A Lilliputian with success

cv. Matterhorn, Zermatt – these are names that come easily to the lips of every Swiss child. And abroad, too, the photogenic 13,000-ft mountain peak and the holiday village lying at its feet in the canton of Valais are a hallmark. Certainly less well known is the fact that in car-free Zermatt a local radio station regularly goes on the air. Radio Matterhorn, founded by Stefan Perren, a native of Zermatt, is a Lilliputian among the Swiss local radio stations.

For fourteen hours a day, only four people handle the programmes, the technical side, the presentation and the administration of this «station for local residents and holiday-makers». Of course, by comparison with Radio DRS, the national broadcasting station, Radio Matterhorn's transmissions have a very simple appeal: together with plenty of music three one-hour broadcasts of news and information are put out daily. The staff (and the money) for any programmes requiring background information is lacking but, as Stefan Perren says: «Anyway, not so much happens in the Matter Valley as in the town centres.»

While other local stations struggle for a few per cent more listeners (and still often lag far behind the national Radio DRS 3 programme), Radio Matterhorn remains the top unbeaten team as regards listener commitment: some 80% of the inhabitants of the region tune in daily to the appropriate FM frequency.

Hints and tips for walkers, snow and piste conditions, local weather forecasts, cinema programmes and the appearance on stage of folk-dancing ensembles – whatever Zermatt and the neighbouring communes have to offer, the Valais radio station relays it all in German, English and French to the holiday-makers in the region. The midday programmes, however, are devoted solely to the locals. In the «En Gueta» (bon appetit) programme, the political, economic and cultural life of the mountain valley is reflected in the dialect of the region. Indeed, the very success of Radio Matterhorn seems to consist in its local limitations, as business manager and programme director Stefan Perren confirms: «Our little broadcasting area is our strength. We have a very strong link with our listeners. If we sometimes make a mistake, they all turn a blind eye. For they know that Radio Matterhorn is their own station.»

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