

ANDREAS FICKERS

TELE-SAAR
Europe's first commercial TV station as transnational experiment*

I. INTRODUCTION

The story of Tele-Saar, the commercial TV station providing both German and French-speaking audiences in the Saarland with programmes funded by advertising in the mid-1950's, constitutes a most interesting episode of European broadcasting history – whether from a technical, an economic, a cultural or a political history perspective. The establishment of the “Saarländische Fernseh AG” on 17 May 1952 marked not just the beginning of private commercial broadcasting in the Saarland, at that time under French economic administration, but also a special chapter of post-war French and German broadcasting history – at a time when commercial radio and television were forbidden both in France's Fourth Republic and in West Germany. In both countries, the concept of public broadcasting had prevailed in the aftermath of the Second World War, with its monopolistic dominance defended by politicians through to the 1980's. In the whole of Germany and France? As in the comic world of Goscinny and Uderzo¹, the Saarland can be seen as that strip of the Franco-German border region where everything was a bit different. The aim of this contribution is to look at why this was the case, studying the background of this private-sector initiative and its long-term consequences. Though the focus is on the 1950's, to really do justice to its exceptional status and media history importance, the story of the Saarländische Fernseh AG needs to be seen within the extended context of Franco-German and European broadcasting history.

After giving a brief historical introduction into the structure of German and French broadcasting at that time and the Franco-German skirmishes during the ups and downs of the broadcasting history of the two countries, I will be looking at the run-up to the creation of the Saarländische Fernseh AG and its actual establishment. In doing so, I will be presenting the key players, i.e. the ones who sat at the negotiating

* This article offers a drastically shortened English version of a book chapter originally published in a three volume series on the history of media in the Saarland in 2010. While this article concentrates on the emergence and short life of the private television station Tele-Saar, the original version mainly focused on the history of the commercial radio station Europe n. 1. See Fickers A., “Die Anfänge des kommerziellen Rundfunks im Saarland. Die Geschichte der Saarländischen Fernseh AG (Tele-Saar und Europe No. 1)”, in Zimmermann C., Hudemann R., Kuderna M., eds., *Medienlandschaft Saar von 1945 bis in die Gegenwart. Band 1: Medien zwischen Demokratisierung und Kontrolle (1945-1955)*, München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2009, 241-310.

¹ The two French comic-strip artists and graphic novelists René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo created in 1959 the comic figure “Asterix” which gave birth to a series of comic books which exploited the story of a village of indomitable Gauls resisting the Roman occupation of their territory. Every album of the series starts with the legendary prologue: “The year is 50 B.C. Gaul is entirely occupied by the Romans. Well, not entirely... One small village of indomitable Gauls still holds out against the invaders. And life is not easy for the Roman legionaries who garrison the fortified camps of Totorum, Aquarium, Laudanum and Compendium...”.

table and were to play a dominant role in the subsequent development of the Franco-German/Saarland broadcasting scene. Having thus set the stage, I will then take a look at the technical side, looking at the company's broadcasting facilities and the accompanying financial and structural aspects. The focus here is on the locational debate and the relationship between the Fernseh AG and the Saarländischer Rundfunk. Alongside the international perspective, a further perspective looks at programme development. The Saarland plebiscite of 1955 and the subsequent integration of the Saarland into the Federal Republic of Germany brought with them major changes in the broadcasting landscape, ultimately tolling the death knell of the private TV station, Tele-Saar, in 1958. Against this backdrop, the intensive Franco-German efforts to reach an amicable solution to the Fernseh AG problem are reconstructed in detail.

2. THE SAARLAND IN THE CONTEXT OF FRANCO-GERMAN BROADCASTING HISTORY

As shown by Michael Rother, the end of the Second World War was by no means a blank page for Franco-German relations in the field of broadcasting technology². Whereas television only really got going again in occupied Germany in the 1950's, France had a headstart over other West European countries directly after the end of the war thanks to its fruitful collaboration with the German occupation authorities during the war and was able to start regular television broadcasting for 12 hours a week in October 1947 already. Together with England, France spearheaded the development of a European television infrastructure in the late 1940's and early 1950's, despite the heated technical, political and industrial discussions over a European standard for black and white television³. Although the spread of television as a mass medium took place at a much slower pace in France than for instance in Great Britain or even West Germany, French television technology – for example the 819-line system – topped the agenda of national technology policy, becoming the symbolic figurehead of France's newly restored "grandeur"⁴. In the middle of this phase of instrumentalising television standards and technology, characterised by the ambivalence of industrial protectionism in the field of television technology on the one hand and international symbolic politics on the other, work started on setting up a commercial TV station in the Saarland, with the private-sector stakeholders in France harbouring the hope that the new station would become a strategic outpost of French television technology.

3. THE BIRTH OF THE SAARLÄNDISCHE FERNSEH AG

1. *The restructuring of broadcasting in the Saarland*

Even though in the late 1940's there was still a long way to go before television broadcasting in the Saarland actually got started, the topic topped the agenda in the consulta-

² Rother M., *Kooperation - Kollaboration - Konkurrenz. Deutsches und französisches Fernsehen bis 1963 (Cooperation - collaboration - competition. German and French television up to 1963)*, Berlin: Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv, 2008.

³ Fickers A., O'Dwyer A., "Reading between the lines: a transnational history of the Franco-British 'entente cordiale' in post-war television", *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture*, 1, 2 (2012). Online: <http://viewjournal.eu>.

⁴ For a detailed analysis of the technopolitics of postwar television in Europe see Fickers A., "Politique de la grandeur" versus "Made in Germany". *Politische Kulturgeschichte der Technik am Beispiel der PAL-SECAM-Kontroverse*, Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2007.

tions between France and the Saarland on restructuring broadcasting in the Saarland. Although “Radio Saarbrücken” had started broadcasting radio programmes in German on 17 March 1946, France continued to control broadcasting in the Saarland until the Saarland government’s adoption of the Broadcasting Act on 28 June 1952⁵. In addition to its statutory authority over broadcasting, France also had great influence over the programmes broadcast in the Saarland, not least in the person of Radio Saarbrücken’s managing director Frédéric Billmann. Born in Alsace, Billmann, an experienced journalist, broadcaster and originally an economist, was responsible for ensuring that the station’s broadcasting policy was in line with French interests. At least until the transformation of Radio Saarbrücken into the Saarländische Rundfunk GmbH in 1952, this was reflected in the pro-French and anti-German stance taken by the station, strategically propagated as the station’s “European mission”⁶.

From 1950 onwards, more and more people started calling for the station to assume a more pro-Saarland profile, reflecting the Saarland’s increased political autonomy. In a letter of the Saarland department of the French Foreign Office dated 7 June 1950, the writer, E. Burin des Rozières, left no doubt that a revision of the current regulations governing broadcasting in the Saarland was unavoidable⁷. In the words of Burin des Rozières, these no longer reflected the political circumstances existing in the Saarland. A solution respecting the legitimate ambitions of the Saarland government on the one hand and French interests on the other needed to be sought. He had therefore instructed the High Commissioner to initiate discussions on restructuring broadcasting in the Saarland. As decided at a preliminary meeting on the subject held in the French Foreign Office (in the department responsible for the Saarland) on 9 May 1950, these discussions needed to focus on finding a formula. At the same time, the Saarland government was discussing proposals for a new Broadcasting Act. This however was much more focused on public broadcasting. Following Grandval’s intervention, a Franco-German commission was set up on 28 June 1950 with the task of coming up with a new statutory basis for broadcasting⁸. In the discussions the most important issue turned out to be whether – as desired by the Saarland government – the right to set up and operate a broadcasting station should be within the sole responsibility of the Saarland government, or whether – as demanded by the French (i.e. Billmann) this right should also be accorded to the not yet founded “Saarländische Rundfunk GmbH”. The long discussions ended with the French proposal being accepted. Following further discussions on the details – for instance the issue of technical standards and taxation –, the commission finished its work at the end of November 1951 with the presentation of a draft act, which was adopted six months later on 18 June 1952 by the Saarland Parliament at third reading, with five votes against and two abstentions⁹.

⁵ In his Decree No. 124 of 16 November 1947, Pierre König, Supreme Commander of French Forces in Baden-Baden bestowed full responsibility for broadcasting in the Saarland on the head of the military government in the Saarland, Governor Gilbert Grandval.

⁶ For more information on Billmann’s role as managing director of Radio Saarbrücken, see Schwan H., *Der Rundfunk als Instrument der Politik im Saarland 1945-1955*, Berlin: V. Spiess, 1974, 83-86.

⁷ A.S. du statut de la radiodiffusion sarroise, a 5-page letter from E. Burin des Rozières to M. Petit, 7 June 1950, in MAE, série Europe, dossier 90.

⁸ Schwan, *Der Rundfunk als Instrument der Politik im Saarland 1945-1955*, 97. The commission met for the first time on 1 July 1950. On 16 October 1950 a sub-commission was set up. After a total of 12 meetings, this reached agreement on 19 February 1951 on “Proposals for a convention governing broadcasting in the Saarland” and on “Statutes for the Saarländischer Rundfunk mbH”.

⁹ For more details on the discussions that took place in the meantime, see Schwan, *Der Rundfunk als Instrument der Politik im Saarland 1945-1955*, 101-107.

2. *The negotiations on the establishment of the Saarländische Fernseh AG*

With the adoption of the new Broadcasting Act, the Saarland broadcasting agency (*Saarländisches Rundfunkamt*) set up under the French military administration was replaced by the “Saarländischer Rundfunk”, a limited company established on 24 October 1952 with 10 million French francs capital. This meant that broadcasting sovereignty was now officially in the hands of the Saarland, even though French influence was maintained through SOFIRAD’s 30% holding, the appointment of four French supervisory board members and Frédéric Billmann’s appointment as managing director. Of decisive importance for the future development of broadcasting in the Saarland was however the provision foreseen in the Broadcasting Act for radio or television stations to be set up or operated fully or partially by domestic or foreign private companies under a state concession.

Even before the new Broadcasting Act had been adopted by the Saarland Parliament, Frédéric Billmann had already started semi-official negotiations aimed at setting up a privately-funded TV station in the Saarland. January 1952 saw Billmann in Paris, conducting talks with Henri de France, who had been recommended to him by General Leschi, the RTF’s technical director, as a suitable partner for such an undertaking¹⁰. Following these talks, de France drafted a 4-page letter to Billmann (dated 19 January), in which he put forward first concrete proposals for setting up a private TV station in the Saarland. With his wording exuding technological nationalism, de France praised the project as a prestige subject for the – in his opinion – qualitatively outstanding French television technology (i.e. the 819-line system), pointing to the immediate and long-term cultural and economic benefits that would accrue to France and the Saarland through such a “joint venture”¹¹. De France put forward the concrete proposal to set up a TV station fully equipped with studios and transmission facilities before the end of the year. Though the technology would be based on French standards, wrote de France, one option involved supplying an appropriate line converter allowing programmes to be broadcast under the German 625-line standard. He saw no problem in being able to raise the required capital via “friendly companies” – though with one proviso: that the capital would be used to fund a private TV station completely independent of the Saarländischer Rundfunk and financed by advertising revenues.

Parallel to his talks with Henri de France and the Société Radio-Industrie, Billmann had also informed High Commissioner Gilbert Grandval and Minister-President Hoffmann about his plans. On 24 January 1952 Hoffmann sent him a reply, stating that the Saarland government full-heartedly welcomed the idea. Just one day later, Grandval similarly confirmed that the French authorities in the Saarland were very much in favour

¹⁰ The name Henri de France is closely associated with the high-resolution 819-line standard for black and white television introduced in France in 1948, as well as with the SECAM colour television system. For more details on Henri de France (1911-1986), see his obituary in issue no. 14 (June 1986) of the *Bulletin du Comité d’Histoire de la Télévision*.

¹¹ “Ces propositions que nous sommes amenés à formuler aujourd’hui, sur votre demande, comme conclusions à nos conversations, s’inspirent essentiellement, nous tenons à le signaler, du désir de contribuer dans un domaine qui nous est particulier, mais qui aura des répercussions immédiates et durables dans le grand public, au resserrement des relations culturelles et économiques de la France de la Sarre. Son retentissement sera d’importance en Europe. Mes propositions ont également pour but d’affirmer les qualités exceptionnelles et la suprématie de la technique française en matière d’électronique. Elles ouvrent enfin la voie à la constitution d’une entreprise franco-sarroise financièrement saine et commercialement rentable, où nous avons entendu respecter la prédominance légitime des intérêts sarrois”. Letter from Henri de France to Frédéric Billmann, 19.01.1952, in MAE Nantes, cabinet politique, dossier 100.

of the plans to set up a private TV station¹². Now that the political road was free to travel down, Billmann –without doubt the person pulling the strings in the establishment of the Saarländische Fernseh AG – presented his ideas to Radio Saarbrücken management on 8 February 1952, defending them as a project taking account of the cultural and political circumstance existing in the Saarland and as a project that stood no chance of being publicly funded¹³. By the end of the month, the sub-commission set up by the Radio Saarbrücken management board came up with a draft agreement that was subsequently signed by the board and Jacques Piettes, the negotiator appointed by the shareholders. This draft was also approved by Saarland Minister-President Hoffmann. In doing so, he requested a few changes, all of which were accepted. On 16 May the “Saarländische Fernseh AG” was officially established, with starting capital of 15 million French francs. Its main shareholders were Prince Rainier III of Monaco (10 Mill.), Charles Michelson (2.6 Mill.), the Saarland broadcasting authority (*Saarländische Rundfunkverwaltung*) (1 Mill.) together with 14 other shareholders, each with a 100,000 franc holding¹⁴. Charles Michelson was appointed as chairman of the board¹⁵.

Just one day after the company was established, a contract was signed between the Saarland Broadcasting Authority and the new Saarländische Fernseh AG, giving the latter the exclusive concession for setting up and operating a commercial TV station in the Saarland¹⁶. The contract provided for the Saarländische Fernseh AG assuming full responsibility for all technical, financial and programme aspects involved in operating a German-language television channel, while 50% of the company’s annual profits were to be handed over to Radio Saarbrücken¹⁷. No sooner had the contract been signed than Frédéric Billmann, in his capacity as managing director of Radio Saarbrücken, approached Minister-President Hoffmann with the proposal that the Fernseh AG should also be given the right to operate a commercial radio station, as in all probability it would “take years” for the Fernseh AG, funded as it was by advertising revenues, to achieve profitability. The reason given was that numbers of TV viewers – i.e. poten-

¹² Schwan, *Der Rundfunk als Instrument der Politik im Saarland 1945-1955*, 107. Prodded by de France, Billmann also considered an involvement of the Saarland Chamber of Industry and Commerce, conducting talks with its president, Herr Jansen. Cfr. *ibid.*, 211, footnote 518.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁴ Among the latter shareholders were Frédéric Billmann and Ernest Schlachter, the son of Frédéric Schlachter, a member of the Radio Saarbrücken supervisory board. For a full list of shareholders and their functions, see *ibid.*, 109-111. On 23 June 1952, the company was officially registered in the Saarbrücken company register (Dept. B, No. 2370) for a duration of 99 years.

¹⁵ Romanian by birth though often considered a “stateless person”, Charles Michelson had played an important role in private broadcasting in France since the late 1930’s. In 1936 Michelson bought a small radio station in Tanger, operating it under the name of “Radio Impérial”. In 1938 it was shut down by French Foreign Minister Georges Bonnet, allegedly because it was interfering with radio communications in the Strait of Gibraltar. Michelson sued the government and won. This led to him offering the share capital of Radio Impérial to the French government for sale. The outbreak of war put a stop to the deal and it wasn’t until Michelson’s return to France from his exile in America after liberation that negotiations were resumed. After a long dispute, agreement was finally reached, with the government paying compensation of 98 million francs. In addition Michelson was given the broadcasting licence for the short-wave Radio Monte Carlo (6.02.1948), as well as the right to broadcast television programmes (22.10.1949) (Télé Monte Carlo). The private archives of Charles Michelson are to be consulted at the Institut National de l’Audiovisuel (INA) in Paris.

¹⁶ Copies of both the Fernseh AG statutes and the contract between the Saarland Broadcasting Authority and the Fernseh AG are to be found in the MAE Nantes, cabinet politique, dossier 100.

¹⁷ The contract did however also provide for the Saarländische Rundfunk transferring 80% of the revenues accruing to it back to the Fernseh AG, at least until the capital invested by the Fernseh AG (incl. 6% interest) was repaid. One this had occurred, the Fernseh AG was in return to transfer ownership of all TV and radio facilities to the Saarländischer Rundfunk. See the copy of the contract in MAE Nantes, cabinet politique, dossier 100, paragraph 12.

tial advertising targets – were not expected to be very high in the first few years. “As however the majority of TV viewers will obviously come from the ranks of radio listeners”, argued Billmann, “it would be a good idea to get all listeners acquainted with the television programmes by giving them the opportunity to at least listen to the audio tracks, wherever possible concurrently with the television programmes”¹⁸. In the view of Billmann, the only way of doing this was to set up a commercial radio station parallel to the TV station, allowing a large-sized audience to be built up. This in turn would ensure higher revenues for the Fernseh AG and at the same time for the Saarländischer Rundfunk.

In his letter, Billmann referred to a decision of the Saarländischer Rundfunk management board of 8 March 1952 to award the concession for its advertising programmes to the Fernseh AG¹⁹. This decision was however tied to two provisos: the total revenue derived from advertising in 1951 was to be defined as the guaranteed minimum revenue for future years; and a funding plan was to be drawn up, detailing ways of upgrading Radio Saarbrücken transmission performance²⁰. Billmann argued that setting up an “advertising station of international format” – parallel to upgrading the transmission performance of Radio Saarbrücken and the start of commercial television – would guarantee the Saarland “hitherto unknown supremacy in the field of wireless transmission”. What was surprising was that, just three days earlier, Billmann had presented exactly the same plans to Charles Michelson, the Fernseh AG’s new chairman of the board, though not as a proposal to be discussed, but as an official request on the part of the Saarland Broadcasting Authority²¹. In the view of Billmann, it was “obvious” that the advertising station could become part of the Fernseh AG without any explicit contractual modification and that it came under the existing agreement between the Saarländischer Rundfunk and the Fernseh AG. In his letter to Michelson, Billmann inferred that he (Michelson) only needed to signal his agreement with the provisions set forth in the letter for them to come into effect²².

Just one week after receiving Billmann’s letter, Minister-President Hoffmann contacted Billmann, informing him of the Saarland government’s approval of a private advertising station being set up. The two provisos were that the Saarländischer Rundfunk should not be subjected to any financial burden, and that the Fernseh AG should itself apply for a frequency to be assigned to it, which should in no way interfere with the operations of Radio Saarbrücken²³.

Looking back at these early months of the Fernseh AG’s operations, it becomes

¹⁸ Letter from Frédéric Billmann to Johannes Hoffmann, Saarbrücken, 29.05.1952, in LA Saarbrücken, AA 85.

¹⁹ Radio Saarbrücken advertising programmes were produced by “Radio Reklame GmbH”, a company in which Radio Saarbrücken had a 95% holding. This transfer of advertising operations to the Fernseh AG also entailed the transfer of the SR stake (1,950,000 million French francs) to the Fernseh AG. See the letter from Frédéric Billmann to Charles Michelson, 26.05.1952, in LA Saarbrücken, AA 85.

²⁰ Berwanger F., *Massenkommunikation und Politik im Saarland 1945-1959. Ein Beitrag zur Untersuchung ‘publizistischer Kontrolle’*, München: UNI-Dr., 1969, 62 and 99.

²¹ Letter from Frédéric Billmann to Charles Michelson, 26.05.1952, in LA Saarbrücken, AA 85.

²² This is exactly what Michelson did – in a letter of 7 August 1952. In it he pointed out that such an advertising station could naturally not be limited to the audio transmission of TV programmes. What was needed instead was to “de multiplier en toute la mesure du possible [...] les heures d’émission et de programmes publicitaires de cette station de radiodiffusion internationale”. Moreover Michelson wrote that though talk was of one advertising station, this could consist of different transmitters (*émetteurs*), allowing it to optimise diffusion. Letter from Charles Michelson to Frédéric Billmann, 7 August 1952, in LA Saarbrücken, AA 85.

²³ Letter from Johannes Hoffmann to Frédéric Billmann, Saarbrücken, 5.06.1952, in MAE Nantes, cabinet politique, dossier 100.

quite clear that Frédéric Billmann was the key player involved in architecting the restructuring of broadcasting in the Saarland. In his capacity as managing director of Radio Saarbrücken and the representative of French interests, Billmann was behind the idea of transforming Radio Saarbrücken into a limited company (Saarländische Rundfunk GmbH) and was the one pulling the strings in the establishment of the Saarländische Fernseh AG, in which he himself held shares. This holding perhaps also explains his major involvement in negotiating a contract between the Fernseh AG and the Saarländischer Rundfunk which – at least at first sight – promised to be a profitable deal for both sides. Billmann’s early reference to Radio Monte Carlo as a template for restructuring broadcasting in the Saarland gives rise to the assumption that he – even though there was no talk of such during the Fernseh AG negotiations – had been thinking about setting up a commercial radio station right from the start. Even before the Fernseh AG was officially established on 17 May 1952, Billmann had been able to convince the Radio Saarbrücken board to wind up the “Radio-Reklame GmbH” and transfer its operations to the not yet established Fernseh AG. The fact that Billmann later switched from being director-general of the Saarländischer Rundfunk GmbH to being managing director of the Saarländische Fernseh AG is an indication that Billmann was successfully leveraging his political, cultural and financial contacts.

3. *The implementation of the technical infrastructure and an increase in capital*

Immediately after signing the agreement between the Fernseh AG and Radio Saarbrücken, work started on planning the transmission facilities in the Saarland. Parallel to ordering the necessary studio and transmission facilities (which were to be supplied by Henri de France, respectively his company Radio-Industrie), Fernseh AG activities focused on finding suitable locations for the television and radio transmitters.

Alongside creating the infrastructure for the transmitters, a second step involved providing the Fernseh AG with sufficient capital to finance the construction of the necessary buildings and technical facilities. This required a major increase in capital and a resolution to this effect was passed at the Annual General Meeting of Shareholders on 30 April 1953. It was agreed to increase the company’s capital by 200 million francs, bringing it up to total of 215 million. 1953 therefore saw a major restructuring of the Fernseh AG, both in terms of the persons involved in the company and its financing²⁴. At the Fernseh AG’s AGM on 30 April 1953, the main shareholder, Prince Rainier of Monaco, had announced that he was selling half of his shares to Charles Michelson, with the latter thereby gaining a majority holding. However, to everyone’s surprise Michelson resigned his position as chairman of the board on 27 July. Just a few months later, both he and Prince Rainier sold their holdings to the company “Image et Son S.A.”²⁵, giving the latter a three-quarters majority shareholding (12,6 of 15 million francs).

This redistribution of the Fernseh AG’s capital also had personal consequences,

²⁴ The financial details below are taken from Berwanger, *Massenkommunikation und Politik im Saarland 1945-1959*, 218-220.

²⁵ Image et Son, founded on 10 February 1950 in Monaco, had equity capital of 1,2 billion francs. One of the companies it owned was the “Société Spéciale d’Entreprises”, the company holding the concession to broadcast television programmes in Monaco. See the letter from Armand Vorms to Gotthard Lorscheider, Paris, 23 August 1954, in LA Saarbrücken, AA 85. Two members of the Image et Son management board were Henri de France and Sylvain Floirat. The latter was later to play a decisive role in the development of the Saarländische Fernseh AG and of Europe 1.

with Henri de France being elected as the new chairman of the board, assisted by Frédéric Billmann and Louis Merlin²⁶ as managing directors. Given the new shareholding structure, the choice of Henri de France as chairman of the board was not surprising, as his company Radio-Industrie was the major shareholder of the Monaco-based Image et Son, whose president was also his father-in-law, Armand Vorms²⁷. Vorms joined the Fernseh AG supervisory board in late November, thereby becoming a colleague of Dr. Gotthard Lorscheider, the person representing the interests of the Saarland government. The restructuring showed not only to what extent Saarland and French interests were interwoven, but also reflected the network of French shareholders. As this network had so many different branches, it is difficult to reconstruct, but what is clear is that Henri de France, Charles Michelson, Louis Merlin and Sylvain Floirat all played key roles²⁸.

4. TELE-SAAR: THE FIRST COMMERCIAL TV STATION IN EUROPE

Despite some problems in setting up the technical infrastructure for the commercial radio stations (Europe 1), especially concerning the long and medium-wave transmitters, the building work on the television studio and transmission facilities was finished a lot quicker, with the first test programme of the new station – now given the name “Tele-Saar” – being broadcast in the evening of 23 December 1953. The station’s studio was located in the new Volksfürsorge building right in the middle of Saarbrücken. Managing director Billmann opened the programme with a speech explicitly mentioning that it was the birthday of Minister-President Johannes Müller, one of the project’s most ardent promoters. Christina Adomeit, the well-known Radio Saarbrücken announcer, then took over, moderating the “Taufsendung”, a programme providing a mix of “chats with locals”, pop music, a fairy-tale film, a short film about Johannes Müller and a “cultural film” produced by Ernst Bingen. On 25 December the local newspaper, the *Saarbrücker Zeitung*, reported on the new programme, prophesying a bright future for the station as a bridge between France and Germany. “As we were able to find out on Wednesday evening behind the scenes, we can expect both German and French programmes to be broadcast in a few months’ time. In the meantime Saarbrücken will only be transmitting its own programmes. Once the technical requirements for taking over programmes from

²⁶ In the 1930’s Louis Merlin had been one of French commercial radio’s founding fathers. After the war he became programme director of Radio Luxembourg, a position he held until 1954 when he moved to the Saarländische Fernseh AG, becoming one of the people behind the Europe 1 conception. Merlin’s own company, “Louis Merlin et Associés” held 10% of Image et Son shares.

²⁷ Finding itself in financial difficulties, de France’s company Radio-Industrie merged with his father-in-law’s company “Société Nouvelle de l’Outillage R.B.V.” in 1954, with the resultant company, “R.B.V. Radio-Industrie” capitalised at 1,5 billion francs.

²⁸ In October 1952, the “Société de Radiodiffusion et de Télévision” had been established. With its symbolic capital of 130,000 francs, its mission was to initiate, organise and financially support the technical development and operations of private radio and television stations outside France. The consortium of 13 shareholders had access to potential capital of several billion francs which could be mobilised for any investment projects with promising financial prospects. Shareholders included not only Henri de France and Charles Michelson, but also leading figures from the press and film industry as well as banks and insurance companies. These included such names as Philippe Boegner (head of *Paris-Match*), Maurice Lehmann (head of the Réunion des Théâtres Lyriques Nationaux), Louis de Wolf (Banque de Bruxelles, the bank holding 40% of Radio Luxembourg shares), Jean Dufour (head of finance at the Crédit Lyonnais) and Pierre Bourgeois (the representative of Pathé-Marconi). See the 14-page «Note pour le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères, A/S: Radiodiffusion et Télévision en Sarre», compiled by the Press and Information Department of the French Diplomatic Mission in the Saarland, Saarbrücken, 23 February 1953, Annex 3, in MAE Nantes, dossier 90.

Germany and France have been fulfilled, the Saarbrücken TV station can be expected to become a true East-West bridge [...]. The prospects for the future of our television broadcasts are looking extremely bright"²⁹. Indeed the station, though operating under what would nowadays be deemed as impossible conditions – the (one and only) studio was just 20 m² big –, showed surprising vitality and creativity in coming up with its own TV programme. By mid-April, the station – now known as Tele-Saar – was already on the air for some 3 hours a day, and its employee headcount, including technical staff, had risen to 37³⁰. June saw the station regularly providing a 3-hour schedule consisting of a 1-hour afternoon programme and a 2-hour evening programme. Generally speaking, the programme schedule was as follows:

17:00	Weather forecast, followed by the news
17:17	Missing persons
17:23	Women's magazine
17:45	Unser Stammtisch (regulars' table)
18:00-20:00	Break
20:00	Weather forecast, news
20:17	A movie
21:50	Local news
21:57	The news (repeat of the 20:00 news)
22:10	Shutdown

Even if the first broadcasts were only watched by little more than a hundred viewers, numbers gradually swelled, reaching 700 in 1954 and 4000 in 1958³¹. These numbers came as no surprise, as the station's transmitter up on the Eschberg was not very powerful (100 kW) and had only a limited range (Saarbrücken and its immediate surroundings). Broadcasting was done solely under the French 819-line standard. This contrasted with the original plan of converting programmes to the German 625-line standard and broadcasting programmes in parallel. Despite the rudimentary equipment (three studio cameras, two electronic projectors for screening movies and one reporting car), the Tele-Saar team produced a daily television offering fully in line with the expectations of that time of television as an information and entertainment medium.

The separation into two programme blocks – the afternoon programme, with its more family-oriented character and mix of feuilleton contributions and news, and the evening programme, which, though dominated by movies, also offered sketches, gala evenings and TV dramas – reflected the target-group-oriented programme planning used by radio stations. A miner's lamp with a hammer and mallet were chosen as the station's logo, a symbol reflecting the station's ties to the Saarland's working population. The few remaining original Tele-Saar recordings make it clear that Tele-Saar was a true local station, providing its – albeit small – audience with live pictures from the whole Saarland region. Whether a chess tournament, an aquarium show, motorbike racing in St. Wendel, the 1st May parade in Völklingen, the 14th July celebrations at Halberg Castle,

²⁹ "Fernseher Saarbrücken aus der Taufe gehoben", *Saarbrücker Zeitung*, 25.12.1953.

³⁰ Berwanger, *Massenkommunikation und Politik im Saarland 1945-1959*, 221.

³¹ These figures are taken from Altmeyer K., *25 Jahre Saarländischer Rundfunk*, Saarbrücken, 1971.

carnival processions, elections, the opening of the first Edeka supermarket, returning prisoners-of-war at Saarbrücken main station, Coca-Cola in the Saarland, an Easter rabbit workshop, Christmas in an orphanage or one of the many sports events broadcast – in retrospective, the range of programmes offered by Tele-Saar hardly differed from that of current regional stations, whether private or public³².

One of the Tele-Saar programme highlights were the “Bunte Abende”, gala shows that took pride of place in television programmes from Day 1 in all European countries. As with so many of these programmes, the “Bunte Abende” were originally broadcast as radio programmes and had been popular since the 1930’s when they had first been heard as the radio version of the stage variety shows. Right from the start, Tele-Saar had two such programmes on offer. Whereas the focus of the “Televarieté” show was on performing artists and dancing, “Telecocktail” developed into an all-evening entertainment show featuring quizzes, games and comedy sketches³³. Heinz Schenk built up quite a reputation as a *conférencier* and was later to become a leading show business personality, presenting the popular *Zum blauen Bock* show. One specific feature of Tele-Saar programmes – also from a European perspective – was the advertising, which took on four different forms: *a*) sponsorship of a certain programme or series, *b*) the broadcasting of short advertising films (something that belonged to any movie watched at the cinema), *c*) what we would now call “product placement”, and *d*) the live broadcast of advertising spots³⁴. Advertising prices depended on the time of day (afternoon or evening) and varied between 7,000 and 10,000 francs for a 20-second spot to 45,000 to 125,000 francs for the sponsorship of a programme. The cheapest way to advertise (between 700 and 1,000 francs) was to have a short 35-mm advertising film broadcast³⁵. From a political perspective, one interesting feature was that the news contained mainly information and pictures coming from Paris and adapted for a Saarland audience. The person of Frédéric Billmann constituted a further guarantee for Tele-Saar’s Francophile course. This did not however take the form of openly pro-French or anti-German propaganda, but was much more to be seen in the programme philosophy with its skilled mix of stylish French culture (especially films and dramas) and regional and folk-style programmes. This philosophy mirrored the ideas already practiced by Billmann at the Saarländischer Rundfunk of establishing the Saarland as a crossroads of Franco-German cultural exchange and thereby as a symbol of pan-Europeanism³⁶. A pre-requisite

³² A potted history of Tele-Saar is presented by Geib M. in his *Fernsehen in den Kinderschuhen. Die Anfänge des Fernsehens im Saarland – eine Bildergeschichte*, to be found in the catalogue of the Saarbrücken Museum of Local History’s exhibition with the title *Von der ‘Stunde 0’ zum ‘Tag X’. Das Saarland 1945-59* (publ. by Gerhard Ames, Merzig 1990, 407-416).

³³ For a description of the Tele-Saar programme schedule, see *Guide de la Radio, de la Télévision et du Disque*, 1^{er} trimestre 1956, 101-104. A detailed reconstruction of the programmes on offer could be achieved through going through the back numbers of the *TELE Bild mit Radio*, the programme guide listing Tele-Saar’s daily programme schedule and presenting or discussing individual programmes. For example, the issue of 19 March 1954 provides an in-depth report of Tele-Saar’s first evening programme, which “in the opinion of experts and listeners (*sic*) [...] can be regarded as an outstanding success”. See “Großer Tag beim Fernsehsender Saarbrücken”, *TELE Bild mit Radio*, Nr. 12 (19.03.1954): 270.

³⁴ See *TELESAAR. La station, Numéro 1’ de la télévision commerciale en Europe*, in *Guide de la Radio, de la Télévision et du Disque* (1^{er} trimestre 1956), 103.

³⁵ Details of the different forms of advertising and their prices are to be found in the 15-page document published by Louis Merlin in November 1954. See Louis Merlin’s “Première documentation sur Europe N°1-Radio, Europe N°1-TV, Télé Monte-Carlo, Telesaar”, published as “TV Information N° 2”, in LA Saarbrücken, AA 86.

³⁶ For more on Billmann’s programme philosophy, see Schwan, *Der Rundfunk als Instrument der Politik im Saarland 1945-1955*, 83-86.

for this symbolic mix was the implementation of the right form of technical interface. Connecting up Tele-Saar to the French TV network was one option discussed but never actually implemented. Despite all efforts and a fair amount of success in compiling an independent programme, the company's provincial character remained evident, especially when compared with the early Eurovision events, which went down in television annals as milestones in European TV history³⁷.

To counteract the danger of the station becoming isolated, Frédéric Billmann contacted RTF in March 1954, officially requesting them to support Tele-Saar by making French TV programmes available³⁸. Despite a number of requests – also on the part of the Saarland Minister-President Hoffmann and Gilbert Grandval and addressed to the French Prime Minister Pierre Mendès-France – the efforts to get Tele-Saar linked up to the French television network came to nothing. One of the proposals put forward was to have the recently set up radio link between Strasbourg and Paris re-routed via Saarbrücken. This would have linked up the Saarland not just to the French but also to the Eurovision network. Whereas Hoffmann regarded such a link as a way of ending “the terrible isolation of Saarland television”³⁹, Grandval explicitly stated that the “animosity” shown by the competent French authorities to the Saarland television project indirectly damaged the prestige of French television and its industry⁴⁰. In Grandval's eyes, the French opposition was first and foremost the result of specific lobbying by the French press companies, who saw commercial broadcasting as a threat to their newspaper and magazine advertising revenues.

1. *Liquidation or state subsidies? The cross-fire between French and German interests*

These speculations do witness of the heated political climate of the Saarland in the mid Fifties. As a result of Franco-German negotiations about the future political status of the Saarland in October 1954 eventually leading to the Paris Treaty (23.10.1954), it was decided that the population should be given the opportunity to decide about its political future in a referendum to be held exactly one year later. While Prime Minister Johannes Hoffmann advocated for making the Saarland an independent European territory, the majority of the population (67,7%) finally voted against the so-called “Saarstatut” and for an incorporation of the Saarland as a Land into the Federal Republic of West-Germany⁴¹. The result of the 23 October 1955 plebiscite had direct consequences for commercial television operations in the Saarland. First and foremost, it meant that the Saarland

³⁷ On this subject see Fickers A., Lommers S., “Eventing Europe. Broadcasting and the mediated performances of Europe”, in Badenoch A., Fickers A., eds., *Europe materializing? Transnational infrastructures and the project of Europe*, London: Palgrave, 2009, 225-251.

³⁸ Letter from Frédéric Billmann to Gilbert Grandval, Saarbrücken, 7.12.1954, in MAE Colmar, Cabinet Politique, dossier 100.

³⁹ Letter from Johannes Hoffmann to Pierre Mendès-France, Saarbrücken, 6.12.1954, in MAE Paris, série Z Europe, Sarre, dossier 90.

⁴⁰ “Quels que soient les griefs qu'on puisse ou non formuler d'autre part à son encontre, il est hors de doute que cette Société sert ici, en matière de télévision, les intérêts industriels et politiques français, et que l'ostracisme auquel elle se heurte de la part de notre administration finit malheureusement, en la condamnant à ne diffuser que des programmes produits par elle et souvent médiocres, par nuire au prestige et même de la télévision et de la technique française”. Letter from Gilbert Grandval to Pierre Mendès-France, 11.12.1954, in MAE Paris, série Z Europe, Sarre, dossier 90.

⁴¹ See Hudemann R., Heinen A., *Das Saarland zwischen Frankreich, Deutschland und Europa 1945-1957. Ein Quellen- und Arbeitsbuch*, Saarbrücken: Kommission für Saarländische Landesgeschichte und Volksforschung e.V., 2007.

was to become part of the Federal Republic of Germany as of 1 January 1957. This in turn meant that broadcasting rights now came under the jurisdiction of the German PTT Ministry. Turning to broadcasting policy, Saarland's "reunification" with the Federal Republic similarly led to alignment with the Federal principle of public broadcasting, in which there was no room for commercial stations. It soon became clear to all involved that this realignment of broadcasting policy was going to have organisational and legal consequences for the Fernseh AG.

After long negotiations between all stakeholders, an agreement was finally reached between the French and German governments in October 1956⁴². This agreement foresaw the French Government purchasing the majority of Saarländische Fernseh AG shares by 31.12.1956 and then shutting down transmissions and winding up the company. In return, the Saarländische Rundfunk was to purchase the technical facilities of Tele-Saar, insofar as these were deemed suitable for future use in the Saarland. The Federal Government also raised no objections to the long-wave station Europe 1 continuing to broadcast for a 3-year transition period. The Federal Government undertook to purchase the land and buildings owned by the Fernseh AG in the Saarland at the end of this period, while the French Government retained ownership of Europe 1's technical facilities. Of decisive importance was that both sides agreed not to put forward any further claims as a result of the premature termination of the contract.

2. German and Saarland objections to Tele-Saar

Notwithstanding the bilateral government negotiations, discussions arose within Germany about the future of the Saarländische Fernseh AG after the Saarland's "reunification" with the Federal Republic. On the Federal level, the German PTT Ministry questioned the legal status of Europe 1 as it was transmitting on a frequency not allocated in the Stockholm Plan of 1952. The Ministry, trying to defend the state monopoly on television broadcasting in the Federal Republic, now saw its chance to put an end to the Saarländische Fernseh AG's television activities. The frequency used for Tele-Saar transmissions up to now (Band 3, Channel 7) was a frequency officially allocated to France, though the RTF had made it available to the Fernseh AG. France was at that time working on developing a national television network, and had erected a new television transmitter in Metz-Luttange at the end of 1957. This needed exactly this frequency to broadcast the national television programme. PTT Minister Stücklen informed the Fernseh AG board of this problem at the beginning of March, "requesting" the company to stop transmitting on this frequency as of 1 July 1958⁴³.

Though the Fernseh AG was successful in remedying interference problems with the French transmitter, PTT Minister Stücklen nevertheless ordered the station to be shut down for good on 15 July. This led to Frédéric Billmann sending dismissal letters to all Tele-Saar employees on 27 March, stating that their employment contracts were unfortunately to end of 30 June 1958. On Tuesday, 15 July 1958, the station broadcasted its final programme, designed fully in line with the sad circumstances. After the children's programme *Unsere Kleinen* had bidden farewell at 17:15, the 9 o'clock evening news

⁴² "Protokoll über eine Grundsatzvereinbarung zur Regelung der Frage Saarländische Fernseh-Gesellschaft – Europe 1", 25 October 1956, in LA Saarbrücken, AA 94.

⁴³ Letter from Stücklen to Billmann, 10.03.1958, in MAE Nantes (now Colmar), mission juridique, dossier 221.

were followed by a programme entitled *Der Rest ist Schweigen... Ein Fernsehsender verabschiedet sich*, roughly translated as *All that remains is silence... A television station says goodbye*. At 22:00 the station went off the air⁴⁴. From 16 July until the end of the year, the Eschberg transmitter continued broadcasting the German television programme in the 819-line standard via a converter, giving viewers with television sets working with the French standard six months to have their sets adjusted to the German 625-line standard.

5. CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to analyse the technological, economic and political climate in which the first commercial television station in Europe emerged. Embedded in the complex post-war history that characterized the relationship between France and Germany in the Saar region, a small group of political and industrial actors paved the way for a premiere in European television history: the start of the commercial television station Tele-Saar in 1953. Despite the fact that this station had a rather short life, it inaugurated the beginning of commercial television on the European continent nearly two years before Independent Television (ITV) started broadcasting in Great Britain in September 1955.

One could be tempted to qualify the Tele-Saar story as an unimportant footnote of European television history. But what started as a result of a techno-political endeavour in Saarbrücken in December 1953 eventually led to the break of the German state monopoly in broadcasting in June 1981 by the Federal Constitutional Court. Because a decree of the Saarland parliament in 1967 that aimed at legalizing the activities of the commercial radio station Europe 1 on German ground, a heated debate about the federal structure of broadcasting in Western Germany arose. This debate, which soon became a major juridical affair, finally ended with the decision of the Federal Constitutional Court Act on the 16th of June 1981, establishing the so-called dual system of both private and public service broadcasting in West Germany.

When looking back to this forty year long struggle for private or commercial broadcasting in West Germany, one is tempted to interpret the fact that the beginning of the end of the state monopoly in broadcasting in West Germany started in a border region between France and Germany as European fate. While transnational radio broadcasting had always been seen as a means of peaceful communication and rapprochement of European nations and people⁴⁵, the national instrumentalisation of television broadcasting in the post-war era had been a constant factor of irritation for millions of people living in border regions all over Europe⁴⁶. In labelling the commercial radio station that guaranteed the financial survival of Tele-Saar “Europe 1”, Billmann & co effectively played with the symbolic capital of the European idea and successfully promoted the vision of broadcasting as transnational and cross-border medium.

But the Tele-Saar case presented in this article questions the European rhetoric

⁴⁴ The official end of Tele-Saar’s broadcasting activities. Tele-Saar continued to exist as a company until the late 1980’s, marketing top-of-the-range radio and television sets from its Saarbrücken headquarters.

⁴⁵ On transnational radio activities in Europe during the interwar years see Lommers S., *Europe – on air. Interwar projects for radio broadcasting*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012.

⁴⁶ See Johnson C., Fickers A., “Roundtable: perspectives on localizing the transnational in regional television history. Introduction”, *Media History*, 16, 1 (2010): 97-101.

and uncovers the techno-political strategies and economic realities lying behind this symbolic manoeuvre. The peculiar situation of the Saarland as a German-French borderland region which suffered from being caught between the two powers turned the introduction of the new technology of television in the 1950s into a unique transnational experiment. Equipped with French technology and driven by French capital yet legally functioning under the authority of the independent Saarland government, Tele-Saar was able to produce a television program in German language that looks – when seen from a historical distance of 60 years – surprisingly modern and sophisticated. The programming and scheduling of Tele-Saar indeed looks very similar to the offer made by commercial television channels today, including the striking presence of commercials. But this experiment in private television came to a sudden end in 1958 when the principle of state monopoly on public service broadcasting was applied to the new “Bundesland”. Yet, the “Tele-Saar” case marks the beginning of the end of the state monopoly on broadcasting in Germany and the Saar region therefore owes its place as small but unbending territory in the European television landscape.

SUMMARY

This article highlights a forgotten episode of European television history: the short yet interesting life of the first commercial television station in Europe called “Tele-Saar”, operating at the French-German borders of the Saar region between December 1953 and July 1958. Financed by French capital and equipped with French technology, Tele-Saar can be analyzed as a speaking example of French post-war techno-politics, demonstrating the close links between political interests, economic strategies and technological ambitions. The specific political context of the Saar region which remained under French protectorate until 1955 makes the story of Tele-Saar a unique example of early transnational television broadcasting in Europe. The article offers a thick description of the main actors involved in the planning and running of the station and analyzes the strategic political and economic motives that stood behind both the installation of the station by the French authorities and its closing due to the return of the Saarland to West Germany in 1957.

RIASSUNTO

Il saggio sottolinea un episodio dimenticato della storia della televisione europea: la vita breve ma interessante della prima stazione televisiva commerciale in Europa, chiamata “Tele-Saar”, operante al confine franco-tedesco della regione della Saar tra dicembre 1953 e luglio 1958. Finanziata da capitali e provvista di tecnologie francesi, Tele-Saar può essere analizzata come un esempio della tecno-politica francese nel dopoguerra, dimostrando i forti legami tra interessi politici, strategie economiche e ambizioni tecnologiche. Il contesto politico specifico della regione, rimasta sotto il protettorato francese fino al 1955, rende la storia di Tele-Saar un esempio unico di primo broadcasting transnazionale in Europa. Il saggio offre una descrizione accurata dei principali attori coinvolti nella progettazione e nello sviluppo della stazione e analizza i motivi strategici politici ed economici dietro sia l’installazione della stazione da parte delle autorità francesi, sia la sua chiusura dopo il ritorno della Saar alla Germania Ovest nel 1957.