

Gabriele Balbi

with Simone Fari, Giuseppe Richeri and Spartaco Calvo

NETWORK NEUTRALITY

Switzerland's role in the genesis
of the Telegraph Union, 1855-1875



Peter Lang

Introduction

The long-term project

In 2009 a research group at the Institute of Media and Journalism of the Università della Svizzera italiana, Lugano, set up a long-term project entitled “The Swiss Influence in the ITU’s decision-making process 1865–1914”. As the title suggests, the aim was to analyze the role played by Switzerland in the creation, early years of development and decision-making processes of the Telegraph Union (nowadays known as the International Telecommunication Union), bringing together political, economic, technical and cultural points of view. The first years of research carried out by the closely-knit team composed of Gabriele Balbi, Simone Fari, Giuseppe Richeri and Spartaco Calvo resulted in the presentation of numerous papers at conferences and publication in scientific journals¹. The rationale of the present volume is partly to collect all these experiences into an organic whole while at the same time drawing on the debates and discussions coming out of the various conferences, suggestions for changes from various peer reviews, as well as the support of a considerable amount of inedited material.

1 G. Balbi et al., “Swiss specialties: Switzerland’s role in the genesis of the Telegraph Union, 1855–1875,” *Journal of European Integration History*, 19/2 (2013); G. Balbi et al., “Specialità svizzere. L’influenza della Confederazione elvetica sull’origini dell’Unione Telegrafica, 1855–1875,” *Tst: Transportes, Servicios y telecomunicaciones*, 25(2013); S. Calvo et al., “La voie suisse aux télécommunications. Politique, économie, technologie et société (1850–1915),” *Revue Suisse d’Histoire* 61/4 (2011); G. Balbi et al., “‘Bringing together the two large electric currents that divide Europe’: Switzerland’s Role in Promoting the Creation of a Common European Telegraph Space, 1849–1865,” *ICON* 15 (2009).

Methodology and main sources

The main methodology backing our approach is multifocal, i.e. it holds that in order to understand fully the social construction of the media and telecommunications, equal consideration must be given to the political, economic, technical and social features contributing to the formation of the object in study. A methodology like this is particularly appropriate when analysing telecommunications, complex structures calling for careful and multiform reflection by all the social components that regulate, realize and use them². It needs to be said, too, that the reference discipline governing this volume is the political economy of communication, which analyses how the structuring presence of the state influences business strategies or, in other words, how constitutive choices made by politics influence media development (Starr 2004, John 2010). The political economy of communication tends to be associated with national politics because states often have different ideas about the ways in which they want to control, develop or limit communications.

This project aims to interface a political economy background with international politics and identify European constitutive choices concerning telecommunications. We hypothesize that Switzerland carried out a decisive role in stimulating and guiding established objectives, i.e. the creation of an international organization able to regulate telecommunications traffic – or in our period essentially electric telegraphy – on a continental level.

The historical analysis was carried out on both primary and secondary sources. A fundamental role was indeed played by the correspondence and commissions set up by the Swiss Federal Council,

2 N. Rosenberg, *Exploring the black box: technology, economics, and history* (Cambridge UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); C. Sterling, P. Bernt and M. B. H. Weiss, *Shaping American telecommunications: a history of technology, policy and economics* (Mahwah, New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006); G. Balbi, “Studying the Social History of Telecommunications. Between Anglophone and Continental Tradition,” *Media History*, 15/1, 2009.

whose federal papers we consulted with care³. Also important were the Swiss government and parliament documents on the international conferences and reunions on telegraphy which took place in various seats between the mid-1850s and mid-1870s, now available in the Swiss Federal Archives, Bern⁴; documents of the Swiss Post and Telegraph Department conserved in the PTT History Archive and Library in Bern⁵; lastly the minutes of the international telegraph conferences and correspondence among the representatives of the Telegraph Union, conserved at the ITU Library and Archives in Geneva⁶.

Next to the primary sources guiding our reconstruction of the story of the telegraph, we quite naturally turned to secondary sources. However, with the exception of two articles by Verdiana Grossi⁷, Switzerland's role in the process of creation and institutionalization of the Union has been almost ignored and therefore there little help was forthcoming. However, there are works which have investigated the role that other nations played in the international organization of telecommunications, most particularly France and the United States⁸. This book is therefore a

3 See <<http://www.amtsdruckschriften.bar.admin.ch/setLanguage.do?lang=FR&currWebPage=searchHome>>, last access 3 November 2013.

4 See <<http://www.bar.admin.ch/index.html?lang=en>>, last access 3 November 2013.

5 See <<http://www.mfk.ch/pttarchivbibliothek.html?&L=2>>, last access 3 November 2013.

6 See <<http://www.itu.int/en/history/Pages/LibraryAndArchives.aspx>>. For the typologies of documents kept in this archive see a note by Gabriele Balbi and Simone Fari available on <http://unhistoryproject.org/research/research_experiences-balbi.html>, last access 3 November 2013.

7 See V. Grossi, "Le rôle international de personnalités suisses du XIX^e siècle dans le domaine des télégraphes," *Hispo*, Octobre 1984 and "Technologie et diplomatie suisse au XIX^e Siècle," *Relations internationales* 39 (1984).

8 In the case of France see L. Laborie (*La France, l'Europe et l'ordre International des communications, 1865–1959*, Thèse pour le Doctorat en histoire contemporaine, Université Paris IV-Sorbonne, 2006), while the works of M. L. B. Feldman (*The United States in the International Telecommunication Union and in Pre-ITU conferences: Submarine Cables, Overland Telegraph, Sea and Land Radio, Telecommunications* (Baton Rouge: printed autonomously, 1974) and A. Rutkowski & W. P. Dizard ("The International Telecommunication Union and the United States: partners of rivals?" In *International Telecommunications and information Policy*.

first attempt to collocate Switzerland – then a new starter – at the centre of an analysis of the origins of the first international organization.

Reference literature

Besides filling a scientific gap in evaluating Switzerland's influence on the Telegraph Union, this volume also intends to contribute to a wider-reaching scientific literature dealing principally with the history of European communications and institutions regulating them.

Firstly, our research marks a further step towards the creation of a European media history and seeks to integrate in some ways with recent researches on European television history⁹. Though European media history is an emerging field of studies¹⁰, years ago the crucial role of communication infrastructures in “Networking Europe” was placed at the heart of the matter by a group of technology historians, gravitating around the “Tensions of Europe Association”¹¹. In particular, this work

Washington: Communications Pr., 1984) witness the American contribution, especially after WWII.

- 9 See for example J. Bignell and A. Fickers (eds.), *A European television history* (Malden MA and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008); J. Bourdon, *Du service public à la télé-réalité. Une histoire culturelle des télévisions européennes, 1950–2010* (Paris: INA Éd. 2011).
- 10 On the increasing attention on European media history see S. Kinnebrock, C. Schwarzenegger and E. McLuskie (eds.), *What is Communication History? European Answers II*. Special Issue of *Medien & zeit*, 3–4 (2011). In 2009 ECREA, the most important association for the study of European communication set up a Communication History Section dedicated to the diachronic study of communication in Europe.
- 11 On this group, see <<http://www.histech.nl/tensions>>. One of the most interesting books on the topic is: E. Van der Vleuten and A. Kaiser (eds.), *Networking Europe. Transnational Infrastructures and the Shaping of Europe, 1850–2000* (Sagamore Beach, MA: Science History Publications, 2006). Forthcoming: A. Fickers and P. Griset. *Eventing Europe: Electronic Information and Communication Spaces in Europe, 1850–2000* (London: Palgrave/MacMillan, 2014).

group sees telecommunications not only as an infrastructure network but also as a decisive tool in developing the so-called “hidden integration” process¹² which some hold to have begun in Europe back in the nineteenth century, way back therefore before the idea of any European Union came to the fore. Among the material structures influencing the practices and definitions of Europe, telecommunications and particularly the telegraph hold indeed an important position, while the Telegraphic Union is recognized as the first institution to conceive the idea of a European space. Investigating the origins of this institution means therefore tracing the idea of European integration via communication, which as this volume shows, is contained in a Swiss project of the early 1850s.

Other authors in “Networking Europe” see a fundamental role of smaller nations as linking agents in Europe, not only in the realm of communications, especially because of the recognized experience of their technical cadres¹³. Our book in a certain sense offers a backing to this viewpoint, reflecting over the importance and excellence of the Swiss technocrats, especially Louis Curchod, who became the first head of the International Bureau of the Telegraph Administration, the managing body of the International Telegraph Union.

Linked again with the “Tensions of Europe” tradition, there is a second field of research which this book aims to be part of – the transnational approach. The term “transnational” has a long, complex

12 T. J. Misa and J. Schot, “Inventing Europe: Technology and the Hidden Integration of Europe. Introduction to the special issue,” *History and Technology*, 21/1 (2005).

13 “The more specialized arenas of technical experts, such as the annual meetings of international organizations, can also be read as European events, where power is expressed through performance. Representatives of smaller or less powerful nations in particular have often been able to use the performances of technical expertise or European unity to position themselves more centrally on the European stage” (A. Badenoch and A. Fickers, “Introduction: Europe materializing? Toward a transnational history of European infrastructures,” in *Materializing Europe: transnational infrastructures and the project of Europe*, ed. A. Badenoch and A. Fickers (Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 15.

and contested history in many political and academic contexts¹⁴, not excluding the history of technology¹⁵. A transnational approach to the study of infrastructures such as communication networks deals with flows over national borders, the international institutions regulating them, supranational economic powers, the circulation of ideas and people through media that cannot be circumscribed by national spaces. Our text aims at reconstructing an unprecedented history of the first transnational institution dealing with regulating communication between various nations and also showing the masterly way the Swiss regulated and ran these flows of transnational communication.

A third developing strand of research into which our text can be drawn is that of the history of international organizations¹⁶, in particular in their functions as political/economic coordinators and technological/social standardisers. Here our focus is on non-governmental institutional players capable of guiding political bodies like national governments or economic ones like big companies. Though the Telegraph Union was the first ever international organization, it has had scarce mention in this field. There are indeed the works of a commemorative nature published by the Union itself, but historical objectivity often takes a back seat to the self-celebratory reconstruction of events¹⁷. The most important

14 A. P. Iriye and Y. Saunier (eds.), *The Palgrave dictionary of transnational history* (Basingstoke UK and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); C. Conrad, "Social policy history after the transnational turn," in *Beyond Welfare State Models. Transnational Historical Perspectives on Social Policy*, ed. P. Kettunen and K. Petersen (Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2011).

15 E. Van der Vleuten, "Towards a transnational history of technology: meanings, promises, pitfalls," *Technology and Culture*, 49/4 (2008).

16 M. Herren, *Internationale Organisationen seit 1865. Eine Globalgeschichte der internationalen Ordnung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2009); S. Kott (dir.), *Une autre approche de la globalisation: Socio-histoire des organisations internationales (1900–1940)*. Numéro spécial de *Critique internationale*, 52 (2011).

17 ITU, *L'Union télégraphique internationale: 1865–1915* (Berne: Bureau international de l'Union télégraphique, 1915); ITU, *L'Union Internationale des télécommunications, cent ans de coopération internationale* (Geneve, 1965); A. R. Michaelis, *Du sémaphore au satellite* (Geneve: ITU, 1965); *L'Union internationale des télécommunications, 1865–1995* (London: International Systems

scientific studies on the Telegraph Union are, instead, by law and political sciences scholars focusing above all on the internal functioning of the Union itself¹⁸. Only in more recent times has the attention of scholars turned to the institutions of the Union, its functions and more importantly for our discourse the international regulation of telecommunications¹⁹. Achieving technical, regulatory and tariff standardization, was indeed a major accomplishment, with economic, social and technical effects which so far scholars have all but ignored. Our book hopes to redress at least in part this situation by studying Switzerland's role in creating a transnational institution capable of regulating communications on a European and then world level.

and Communications LTD, 1995); P. Tarjanne (avant-propos par), *Union internationale des télécommunications: célèbre 130 années d'existence 1865–1995* (Genève: International Telecommunication Union and International Systems and Communications Ltd., 1996).

- 18 V. Meyer, *L'Union Internationale des Telecommunications et son Bureau* (Bern: manuscript, 1946); A. G. Coddington Jr, *The International Telecommunication Union. An Experiment in international cooperation* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1952); J. F. Navarro, *ITU: síntesis de organización, funcionamiento y objetivos de la Union Internacional de Telecomunicaciones* (Chile: Entel-Chile, 1975); J. Horrenberger, *L'Union Internationale des Télécommunications ou Les exigences techniques comme facteur de la coopération internationale* (Mémoire pour l'obtention du diplôme des Hautes Etudes Européennes section des sciences de l'information, Université de Strasbourg, 1976); P. Durand Barthez, *Union Internationale des Télécommunications* (Thèse pour le doctorat en droit, Université de Paris I-Panthéon-Sorbonne Sciences Economiques-Science Humaines-Sciences Juridiques, 1979); F. Lyall, *International communications: the International Telecommunication Union and the Universal Postal Union* (Farnham, Surrey UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011).
- 19 G. Nachszunow, *Développement des télécommunications et organisations internationales* (Créteil: W. Nachszunow, 1989); S. Schmidt and R. Werle, *Coordinating Technology: Studies in the International Standardization of Telecommunications* (Cambridge-London: MIT Press, 1998); Laborie, *La France, l'Europe et l'ordre international des communications (1865–1959)*; L. Laborie, *L'Europe mise en réseaux. La France et la coopération internationale dans les postes et les télécommunications, années 1850-années 1950* (Bruxelles: PIE Peter Lang, 2010); S. Fari, *Una penisola in comunicazione. Il servizio telegrafico italiano dall'Unità alla Grande Guerra* (Bari: Cacucci Editore, 2008).