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Sobre este texto:

El texto esta basado a una ponencia que presentó en la conferencia Global Communication Electric: Social, Cultural, and Political Aspects of Telegraphy (18-19.02.2011, Berlín) y que he actualizado en algunas detalles. He añadido un párrafo que esboza algunas ideas respecto al material que he encontrado hasta ahora en los archivos de Buenos Aires. Mi actual viaje de investigación es el comienzo de la fase empírico de mi proyecto.

Hasta ahora he discutido mi proyecto sobre todo con colegas historiadores de America Latina en el marco de la academia Alemana y con investigadores internacionales especializadas en la historia de los comunicaciones globales. Por eso me interesa especialmente la perspectiva pensado desde la historia Argentina en la discusión en el coloquio. ¿Como les parece el enfoque entre la historia Argentina y la historia de la globalización? ¿Cubren las preguntas centrales el tema adecuadamente?

From Wireless to Radio: Global Players and local Amateurs in Argentina

I would like to begin my presentation with a quote by Fritz Pauli, who was employee of Telefunken, the German international wireless telegraphy company. At the beginning of the twentieth century Telefunken expanded massively into the South American market. In 1913 Pauli explained in a public presentation:

"The reason why those (Latin American) countries embraced radiotelegraphy considerably earlier and took advantage of it more generously than many old cultural nations (*Kulturnationen*) is to be found first and foremost in the peculiar conditions of the tropical vegetations and primeval forests. Those regions, nearly completely isolated from traffic and civilization, which up to this point had rendered all efforts to connect them futile, now very suddenly have been connected by the means of "wireless telegraphy" among themselves and with the centres of civilization. By improving these conditions, trade and progress flourished and thanks to the use of this technology some areas could be colonized and populated for the first time.

The experiences in the vast jungles taught us that the application of the old wired telegraphy and telephony offered only short-lived successes. [...] Obviously, we cannot assume profitability of facilities which demanded for their completion to cut miles of pathways – at high costs – through primeval forests. Furthermore, humidity and heat lead to an early weathering of wires and poles; termites and cable borers as well as wild boars chopped telegraph poles even before they were in use. Last but not least the numerous monkey hordes, which practised their tightrope acrobatics at the wires, managed to tear the most durable wires to pieces, or, when several were available, they twisted them skilfully together.

Under those conditions it became impossible to maintain the telegraph lines and to keep them open permanently. Therefore, the South Americans seized this new invention with both hands and managed to make use of radiotelegraphy by drawing powerful advantages from it, with a success unrivalled by other nations."¹

Wireless telegraphy - or radio telegraphy as it is sometimes called - revolutionized communication at the beginning of the twentieth century. Wireless transmission of information by radio telegraphy made it possible to communicate with ships on the high seas and to reach hitherto inaccessible regions. This technological breakthrough was a vital basis for the wireless transmission of sound and led to the invention of radio broadcasting. Mass audiences were attracted by the coverage of cultural, political and sports events. The statement by Fritz Pauli is on the one hand full of marketing rhetoric and exotic images of Latin America, where there was a supposed

¹ Pauli, Fritz: *Telefunken im lateinischen Amerika*, Berlin 1914 (Sonderabdruck aus der Halbmonatsschrift "Süd- und Mittel-Amerika" vom 20.3.1914).

division between civilization and backwardness. On the other hand, it also demonstrates a great interest in modern communication technology in the region as well as the admiration of technocrats like Pauli for the will to modernization in Latin America.

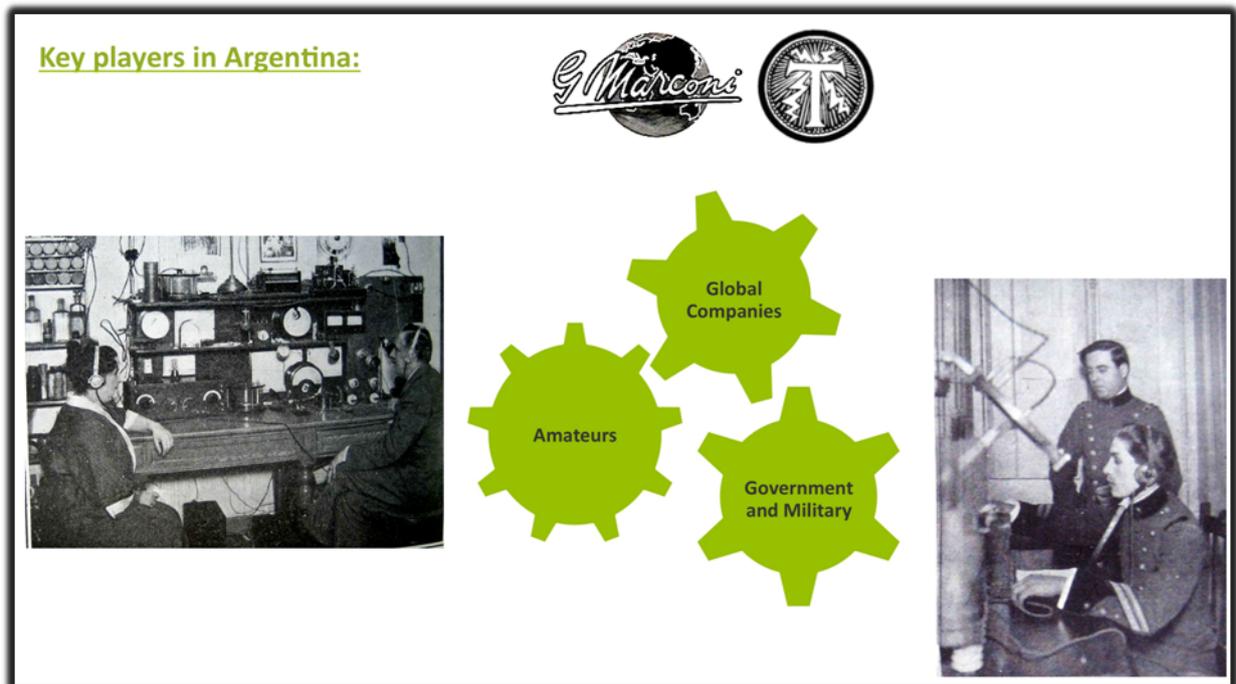
My doctoral thesis examines the beginnings of wireless news transmission in Argentina between 1905 and the onset of the world depression in 1929, which marked a watershed for the hitherto burgeoning broadcasting sector. During this period, there were great hopes in Argentina and other Latin American countries that the alleged gap in 'development' between the region and the industrial nations of the world could be overcome. These hopes were accompanied by new opportunities of wireless telegraphy and later the radio as they implied new and hitherto unknown first hand experiences of "modernity" by fast distribution of information and possibilities of direct transmission.

Argentina's leading role in the early history of the wireless in Latin America raises an important set of questions pertaining to the assembling of the new technology, its organisation and how Argentinean society dealt with it:

Which individuals and groups formed the networks that circulated information and news about wireless to and from Argentina and applied it within the nation? Which concepts for the application of wireless did local and global actors subscribe to? To what extent were concepts from Europe and the United States discussed, acquired, transformed or rejected? Did Argentinean or Latin American models for the implementation of radio technology emerge? Did different concepts of radio technology lead to conflicts between different actors? Which influences of the technology were desired or feared by them?

What forms did the local acquisition and application of the new technological knowledge take? How were the new forms of communication applied at the political level and which societal groups could partake in them? And did the technology influence the position and self perception of Argentineans and their nation in the modern world?

In order to answer these questions, we have to focus on Argentina's military, technocratic elites, government officials and radio amateurs, who largely came from the urban middle and upper classes.



Cross-linked actors: Key players in the development of radio technology in Argentina.

In tune with international trends, the navy sought to use the new technology for military-strategic purposes. On the world market, the large enterprises aimed to sell exclusive models of application to corporate clients. By contrast, the amateurs sought to democratise broadcasting in the sense of letting the broad masses participate in the development, consumption and application of the new technology. For instance, they organised the first national radio broadcasts of operas performed in Buenos Aires. Against this background, the early debates about the future and use of the wireless technologies shall be analysed in my project.

The new form of communication evolved in two overlapping phases. The testing and early application of the wireless telegraphy constituted the first phase, which lasted from 1904 until 1918 and which was characterised by the domination of the larger European (and American) multinational companies in the international communication market. Three international conferences on radiotelegraphy in Berlin

in 1903 and 1906, and in London in 1912 sought to regulate the markets and solve technical issues like the division of the wave-spectrum. Imperial rivalries reached their climax during the First World War, when each of the conflicting parties sought to build all-encompassing wireless networks across all regions of the world, including Latin America.

Before the First World War the main competitors in the wireless field were the market leader, the British North American Marconi Company, closely followed in market share by the German Telefunken. Both companies began to move into the Argentinean communication market around 1905. Nation states, and in particular the navies, were the main target group for selling wireless equipment. The Argentinean Navy made comparative tests with the equipment of both Marconi Co. and Telefunken in 1907. Telefunken won the navy's favour and became also the exclusive supplier of the Argentinean military. Beginning in 1907 the Argentinean government bought wireless equipment for navy vessels, mobile systems for the army as well as land based stations to communicate along the shores and with the interior. A great number of military officials got into contact with wireless telegraphy and received training on those stations. The efforts of the government were also covered in newspapers and popular magazines.

The second phase began in Argentina about 1910. A public debate gathered pace which addressed societal visions of the future with regard to the new means of wireless communication. This debate involved a variety of groups, including radio amateurs as well as scientists and government officials. Argentina based inventors who worked in the wireless field shared their findings in scientific conferences. For example, the roundtable on telegraphy of the International American Science Conference (*Congreso Científico Internacional Americano*) held in Buenos Aires in July 1910, discussed the future of the technology. Argentinean delegations also participated in the radiotelegraphy conferences of 1906 and of 1912.

The first wireless telegraphy amateurs emerged before the First World War. Some of them got into trouble with the strict anti-espionage decrees of their government which

prohibited the use of wireless during the war. The easily visible antenna constructions casted suspicions of spying for the fighting powers on some amateurs.

However, the war did not put an end to the radio amateurs. A growing number of wireless enthusiasts read first reports about the wireless relaying of language and sound, the so-called 'wireless telephony'. In August 1920², the first Latin American radio broadcast was transmitted by radio amateurs from the theatre *Coliseo* in Buenos Aires, by the way the Wagner opera *Parcifal*. In 1921 81 amateurs funded the *Radio Club Argentino*. Two years later, in 1923 the first broadcasting stations with regular and daily programming went *On Air*. In 1927 a fourth international radiotelegraph conference took place in Washington, trying to solve the problems which had emerged through the rapid development of radio after the First World War. In Argentina a broad sector of society participated in the emerging debates, which focused in particular on the effects the new radio technology would have on society, time and space. Many Argentineans distanced themselves from those notions of temporal remoteness from western modernity that had played a central role in the Latin American debates of the long nineteenth century. Aiming at this debate I would like to ask in my project: Which forms did the local debate take? Which concepts from abroad were discussed, applied or rejected?

Remarkably, Argentina was ever since the 1920s at the forefront of developing the broadcasting sector not only in the allegedly backward region of Latin America, but at a global level as well. Equally sophisticated as the technological centres of Europe and the United States, Argentina was indispensable for the growth of the new mass medium in the region. The simultaneous developments across the globe challenge assumptions about the spreading of technological innovations from North American and European centres to peripheral regions. It is therefore worth enquiring into the exchange of knowledge between the different areas.

Most scholars have examined the wireless separately from the radio; however, this division does not correspond to the perspectives of contemporaries. For them, the

² The first British broadcast by the Marconi Co. was on 15th June 1920, the famous Australian soprano Dame Nellie Melba.

transition from the wireless to the radio was a technological ‘process of progress’, in which they had been active participants. Thus, the phase of transition from one area of applied technology to another – that is, from a point-to-point-communication based on telegraphy and the telephone to a novel mass medium with a central broadcasting station and innumerable listeners – shall be at the heart of my enquiry.

This project aims to enrich Argentinean historiography as well. Most studies of the radio have been conducted with reference to Argentina’s national history, whereby the early phase of experimenting with broadcasting technology remains to be examined. While these studies emphasise the political and economic history of the radio, they neglect the formative cultural aspects of the new phenomenon. A global perspective that focuses on the transfer of knowledge and ideas is needed.

Argentina neither had a great electronic industry, nor great inventors in the field of wireless. But Argentineans had chutzpah, self confidence and were innovative and early adopters of the new technology. Their eagerness to be on the forefront of technological innovation made them develop the biggest radio broadcasting sector in Latin America.

First results of empirical research in Buenos Aires

In order to incorporate Argentina’s role in the development of wireless news transmission as a global phenomenon, my primary research began in Buenos Aires in April 2011. So far, I worked through the publications of engineer associations like *Ingeniería* and the *Informe Anual del Centro de Ingenieros Alemanes en la Argentina*. At the *Biblioteca Nacional*, the *Centro de Información Técnica de la Comisión Nacional de Comunicaciones* and the *Radio Club Argentino* I researched the *Révista Telegráfica* – a magazine first specialized on telegraphy but from its start covering also radio, eventually becoming the most important publication on this topics in the region – as well as the *R.C.A.*, monthly of the *Radio Club Argentino*, and the *Buletín Mensual de Correos y Telégrafos*, official publication of the same Argentinean institution.

To better cover the national institutions and their actions in the international arena I would like to access the collections of the Ministries of the Navy and of the Interior and the Exterior, since they played a leading role in regulating wireless telegraphy and the early use of the radio. I plan to visit archives of companies, radio amateurs and governments in Germany, England and the US in the near future.

Even though I have not started yet with a detailed analysis of the encountered material there are some interesting first results. Regarding the key actors on the national level in Argentina, which helped to shape the future of radio technology, next to the military the role of the middle and especially high levels of telegraphy experts has to be accentuated. The national elite of communication experts of *Correos y Telégrafos*, a bureaucratic entity which responded to the ministry of the interior, not only shaped national politics, for example through intervening in the affairs of the Marconi Company. Important managers of the institution founded *Revista Telegráfica* and shaped with this publication a well prepared expert audience for the emerging communication "revolution". *Correos y Telégrafos* fought for the control over radio technology within Argentina, first against foreign companies, especially Marconi, then against the navy and the Ministry of the Navy and before the First World War also against private use of the technology. Arguing against military supremacy in the field of wireless and for civil control – of course through *Correos y Telégrafos* – by citing the regulations in Europe and the USA as well as the international treaties signed in Berlin and London, they tried to maintain and widen the scope of their organization. First arguing against private licensing of wireless technology citing the Argentinian telegraphy laws, the staff of *Revista Telegráfica* started to lobby for new communication laws after local courts decided in favour of private licensing and in the same time started to lobby for the idea of the "radio aficionado", as already established in the USA discourse.

With the founding of the *Radio Club Argentino* three key groups of the soon to be radio communication elite joint their efforts in promoting the technology and lobbying their shared interest:

With the foundation of *RCA* Military and civil experts working for the state, private entrepreneurs as well as other local technology enthusiasts formed the first association of this kind in Latin America. The leading role of Argentinean amateurs in the region is visible in the growing circulation of *Revista Telegráfica* in other Latin American countries and the growing coverage of events in other countries of the region within the magazine. The national pride in the regional pioneering role is also very present in Argentinean publications and clearly visible in a *Revista Telegráfica* cover from September 1927.



**National pride and regional pioneering role:
Revista Telegráfica N° 180, September 1927.**

But Argentinean radio amateurs didn't limit their action to a national or regional radius. As the amateur hobby enabled individuals to communicate with same minded persons around the world, a tendency for global interaction can clearly be detected. On the one hand by searching for individual global communication, by hunting distance record and by holding international competitions, all confirmed through postcards (QSL cards). On the other by taking part in the founding of the International Amateur Radio Union in Paris in 1925, and by trying to influence the Argentinean position at the International Radiotelegraph Convention in Washington 1927 in favour of amateur radio through their governmental and military contacts.