5151: The League of Nations conference correspondent: The 20th
century inception of the epistemic project of transnational journalism

Key sources of conflict, such as economic insecurity, nationalism and militarism are on the rise again in our time. These same factors may be to blame for many of the disasters that shook the global community in the first half of the twentieth century, which justifies a look back at the journalistic agency – and its role in global developments – of the time. ‘Moral Disarmament’ against ‘false news’ and hateful speech were already on the League of Nations’ (LoN) agenda in the early thirties (cf. Nordenstreng & Seppä, 1986; Lange 1991: 101-104, LoN Archive Geneva, Information Section 1928, 1162/3301).

With the creation of the LoN and the rise of the idea(l) of ‘open diplomacy’ (Information Section of the League 1928: 17) the foreign correspondent (specifically in the form of the international conference correspondent) increased strongly in relevance. Yet, while both the League’s significance for the development of the global political system (cf. e.g. Pedersen, 2018) and the impact of technological progress of the 19th century on the global media system (cf. Thussu 2006, Barth, 2011) may be considered common knowledge, the LoN correspondent as one nexus point of these factors remains underresearched. Not only did the League and its public conferences in themselves ‘[provide] space for the creation of this epistemic community’, were ‘journalists of different nationalities met and interacted, and began to develop a more cohesive (or more contested?) vision of what journalism was and what it could achieve for the League of Nations’ (Tworek, 2010: 23). It also strongly invested in new technologies such as telephone, radio and ‘ronography’ (LoN Archive Geneva, Services of Publications and Documents, 1934, 10491/5538) and vocally encouraged and conceptualised the erection of an epistemic network, a “unique international press centre” framed by the so called “Geneva Atmosphere” (Information Section 1928: 50, 84-85).

The Geneva press community thus developed into one of great significance, both for the internationalist spirit and the development of the modern news media system. It is in Geneva that transnational journalism entered the evolutionary process that Hellmueller (2016) for modern day global journalism describes as follows:

‘Because more and more journalists around the world share the same idea of professionalism or ideals of press freedoms, a global logic is developing […]’ (ibid:9).

A such ‘global logic’, which many scholars identify (cf. Hanitzsch, 2007), ‘[sometimes suggests] an all-encompassing consensus among journalists toward a common understanding and cultural identity of journalism’ (ibid:368).

Borrowing from Peter Haas’ (1992) concept of ‘epistemic communities’ (cf. also Tworek, 2010; Herren, 2009), and Hanitzsch’ (2007) analysis of ‘journalism culture’, and following the suggestion that LoN journalists and officials indeed formed a such community championing free speech and transparent diplomacy (cf. Tworek 2010:23; Lange, 1991), we concentrate on
tracking the nature and evolution of this epistemic project aimed at free speech, journalistic autonomy and the universal right of information. Following a historical approach, we furthermore engage in and seize the methodological challenges and opportunities of cross-border journalism research, the conceptualisation and definition of ‘transnational products’ of journalism and its ‘epistemologies’ (cf. Hanitzsch, 2007).

Conceptualised as a long-term evolutionary process, this epistemic project incorporates both correspondents (professional sphere) and LoN Information Section (institutional sphere). These spheres are reconstructed in a composite analysis of LoN Information Section files from the Geneva archives, and the collective biographies of information officers and accredited Geneva journalists from Germany, France and the British Empire. With the help of a database created from that information, we are able to concentrate on focus biographies of single actors and to identify patterns of social and cultural factors shaping the evolutionary process.

Our presentation will feature the following:

- first results of our collective biographical research;
- a demonstration of the prototypical database we developed applying the compiled data from actor biographies;
- an exposition of our historical-hermeneutic source and document analysis concerning the working conditions and environment in Geneva.

Whether the Geneva community did indeed at any point in time qualify as an “epistemic community” (Haas, 1992) accordingly remains questionable. While the journalists organised as early as 1920 in the Association Internationale des Journalistes auprès de la Société des Nations, they had to fight hard to enforce the privileges and rights the League had promised, with the lofty goals of the new global system quickly turning out to be little more than a normative postulate (cf. Hohenberg, 1995; Löhr & Herren, 2014). Even the press community itself was far from unanimous in ideology or motive (Lange, 1991). Then (as now), the new breed of transnational journalists had to constantly negotiate their role as a foreign correspondent, their national identity and their employers’ motives and strategy. Yet, even correspondents with strongly nationalist otherwise ideologically incongruent views and agendas (Manigand, 2003) that might otherwise impair the LoN’s normative goals, as an unintended consequence found themselves contributing to what we can confidently identify as the epistemic project of transnational journalism.

Primary sources
Information Section Files (1920-1945), League of Nations Archive, Geneva.

References


