

“Zeppelin über Berlin” – on the distribution of an early media event

Pelle Snickars

On a Saturday noon in late October 1904 the first issue of the newspaper *BZ am Mittag* appeared in Berlin. The front page was filled with articles reporting on the Russian-Japanese War and the subsequent storming of Port Arthur. The *BZ* was a true novelty on the Berlin newspaper market. The publisher Ullstein Verlag believed there was a market share to be gained by launching a “Mittagszeitung” keeping the public updated with the latest news during lunch hours. Consequently the *BZ* had to be edited and printed rapidly. Soon the paper advertised itself as the quickest newspaper in the world completely relying on news provided by modern technologies as telephones and telegraphs. Yet in terms of distribution the launching of the *BZ* was also remarkable since the newspaper depended on sales of individual copies only. As Peter de Mendelssohn put it in his seminal book *Zeitungsstadt Berlin*, distribution itself became a trademark of the *BZ*.¹ One could not subscribe to the *BZ*, the idea was instead to deliver it *en masse* onto the streets of Berlin. Each issue was to be individually sold to whoever wanted to obtain a copy. Hence, the distributional strategy of the Ullstein Verlag was to use hordes of young men and boys taking off into different city directions shouting: “Bezett am Mittag”, “Bezett”, “Bezett”. The paper was, thus, literally brought on the market. The typical roll call for the *BZ* soon became an auditive trademark of modern Berlin accentuating the rapid pace and the urban tempo of the *Reichshauptstadt*.

As Peter Fritzsche argued in his *Reading Berlin 1900*, the launching of the *BZ* is best considered a modern mass media event.² The newspaper’s special distributional strategy is, hence, illustrative of one of many media historical transitions occurring around previous turn-of-the-century. In a German context this particular historical phase of modernity is sometimes referred to as the, “Massenmedialisierung des zweiten Strukturwandels der Öffentlichkeit”, a kind of second mass mediated transformation of the public sphere. Even Jürgen Habermas has hinted in an introduction from 1990 to his classic study *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, that too little emphasis was put on other media than press in his decisive book. The decline of the “bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit” which Habermas lamented was caused by the expansion of a new broader “massenmediale Öffentlichkeit”, a public sphere defined by, but also saturated with mass distributed media to which modern types of daily press as the *BZ* belonged.³ Early cinema, modern newspapers and other contemporary media can today be considered important historical factors determining a by 1900 decisively established “Medienmoderne” – an epoch certainly stretching back in time, perhaps to the beginning of the 19th century, yet by around 1900 a characteristic German term hinting at the way media



Fig. 1. 'Zeitungsvendin am Potsdamer Platz, 1906, Berlin'.
[Photograph by Philipp Kester. Fotomuseum im Münchner Stadtmuseum.].

had begun to influence and affect, penetrate and regulate experiences in everyday life. Moving pictures and the gradual establishment of a metropolitan film culture did play an important role in this transformation. Yet, in terms of impact on society, early cinema was but one public media sphere, "eine mediale Teilöffentlichkeit" within the greater "Medienmoderne".⁴

A productive way of historically situating and understanding the different public media spheres in previous turn-of-the-century Berlin is to analyse how a major event was mediated and distributed at the time. One such event was the so called "Zeppelin-Sonntag", the "Zeppelin Sunday" on the 29th of August 1909. This article will focus on the dissemination and distribution of this event, in particular through imagistic distribution in various media. But the topic is also linked to key questions on the establishment, differentiation and transformation of the public media sphere around 1900. In the following, daily press as the *BZ* is used as the primary empirical source for detecting various distributional media strategies. As is evident from a photograph taken by Philipp Kester in 1906 – one of Germany's first photo journalists working for a number of German illustrated weeklies – there were numerous publications distributed within Berlin at the time (Fig. 1). Within film and media history, journalism is still an underused, albeit productive resource to add to the repertoire of documents bearing on, for example, film and media culture, the public sphere and historical spectatorship, exhibition and regulation, as well as distribution. In addition, the newspapers examined in this article, *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, *Berliner Tageblatt* and *BZ am Mittag*, were mass oriented media at the time – in contrast to the fairly limited editions of national German film trade papers as *Der Kinematograph* and *Lichtbildbühne*. The total circulation of the major dailies in Berlin around 1910 adds up to almost a



Fig. 2. ‘B.Z. am Mittag’ 1909’. Newspaper advertisement with superimposed photograph of the Potsdamer Platz. [Ullstein Verlag.]

vidence on media distribution gleaned from the Berlin daily press does not automatically lead to historical assumptions suitable for the whole of Germany. Moreover, even if the analysed newspapers belonged to the most important contemporary German mass media at the time, as modern consumer items their popular appeal was far from the Anglo-American “yellow press”. The *Berliner Tageblatt* for instance, never featured any images whatsoever. In an international perspective Berlin dailies were traditional and text oriented nationalistic newspapers, with the *BZ* being slightly more liberal. Still they formed the basis of the city’s public sphere shaping notions and ideas of society, culture and economics.

The purpose of the daily press is, of course, news and actualities; the press distributes information to the public on what is happening. The Berlin press around 1910, however, also distributed and mediated information about other mass media, especially in terms of reports on other media depicting current events. This lay in accordance with a German cultural reformist agenda that, in short, tried to avoid reporting on media – and especially film – as popular entertainment and instead wanted to associate media with instructive education, art and the mediation of knowledge. The *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* in 1909 for example devoted more articles to mediated sound, gramophones and phonographs than to the medium of film. Mediated sound had an apparent artistic potential and phonographs and gramophones were promoted as private rather than public media.⁸ Still, in terms of imagistic distribution there did exist a vital

million copies on a daily basis. Moreover, the major illustrated weeklies – full of reports on Graf Zeppelin’s air travels during the summer of 1909 – had an even higher circulation with the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* and the Berlin based *Die Woche* dominating the market. Thus, the city’s mass printed press firmly established Berlin as the “Medienhauptstadt” of Wilhelmine Germany, a city “still in the stages of rapid growth, [where] newspapers established themselves as metropolitan institutions, fashioning new, more assertive journalistic practices”.⁵

Yet, as Detlef Briesen has shown in his book *Berlin – die überschätzte Metropole*, “Medienrealität und die empirisch festgestellten Fakten stimmen bei der Stadt Berlin ... nicht [immer]”.⁶ What a city really is – in comparison to what the public opinion mediated through the press thinks it is or imagines it to be – does not always correspond. The Berlin daily press was a frequent producer of staged urban imagery.⁷ Thus, the empirical evi-



Fig. 3. 'Zeppelinstag'. Frontpage of the newspaper *Berliner Tageblatt*, 29 August 1909.

appropriation of mediations of actualities. A striking advertisement for the *BZ* in 1909 makes a case in point (Fig. 2). The *BZ* advertisement with a superimposed photograph of the Potsdamer Platz, produced by the Ullstein Verlag, gives a clear indication as to

how the press promoted and perceived itself as the primary distributor of current events. As the medium of modernity *par excellence* the press naturally incorporated other media as, for example, photography.

There can be no doubt that the printed press certainly was the primary mediator of events in Berlin around the previous turn-of-the-century. Nevertheless, what is intriguing is how other media rapidly followed in the mediation and distribution process, not the least by catering to a public and commercially profitable demand by visualising events already known. Joseph Garncarz has dealt extensively with the issue within the earliest phase of German film history. Though variety programs around 1900 did present fictional films, Garncarz has argued that visual reports, “*optische Berichterstattung*”, became the staple of the variety and vaudeville show at the time. According to Garncarz, visual reports, “did not provide new information, but visualised events that were already known”.⁹ By 1910 this was still the case, thus, when reports on media were published or advertised in the press the inserts were often linked to events that newspapers had mediated before. Illustrated lectures on up to date actualities for instance got a fair amount of coverage, and since the Berlin daily press had few illustrations it was common with media tie-ins where the press featured repeated ads for illustrated weeklies – often because they were owned by the same publisher. Indeed, the “Zeppelin Sunday” triggered press advertisement for illustrated lectures on airships, and the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* used Zeppelin’s arrival to promote another flying event – “*Wrights Flug-Vorführungen auf dem Tempelhofer Felde zu Berlin*”, the same place where Graf Zeppelin landed his airship. In addition, the “Zeppelin-Sunday” prompted a special illustrated aviation publication, the *Aviatik*, a survey of the history of flying machines published by the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* (who financed Wrights flying attempts) to be promoted in a typical media tie in. The *Aviatik* was distributed as part of the illustrated weekly *Die Woche* – and it hardly comes as a surprise that both *Die Woche* and the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* were owned by the same Scherl Verlag.

On “Zeppelin Sunday” in late August 1909 all of the front pages of Berlin’s newspapers were filled with reports, maps and illustrations of the event. The morning edition of the *Berliner Tageblatt* for example featured the headline, “Zeppelinstag” – the airship “ZIII is today expected in Berlin” (Fig. 3). The “Zeppelin Sunday” was without a doubt an early media event distributed in numerous ways within the public sphere of Berlin. Even if the concept of “media events”, as described by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz in their *Media Events. The Live Broadcasting of History* has predominantly been used in relation to television, there did exist similar patterns of mediation prior to television.¹⁰ Media events are in fact an appropriate way of describing how major occurrences as the “Zeppelin Sunday” was mediated on a mass scale already by 1910. Indeed, Dayan and Katz concept of media events should be historicized. Their book is interesting but as often with communication studies, completely ignorant of the history of visual media prior to television. The visual, then televisual and nowadays digitised way of mediating events and distributing actualities, naturally has a history preceding television and newsreels. This is a media history where early cinema and the visual media practises surrounding it are vital, yet neglected in terms of scholarly research. The history of imagistic distribution of news within the various media networks of modernity is still unwritten.

The Zeppelin flight over Berlin during late August 1909, however, was not only mediated and distributed through the daily press. On the first of September 1909 Messsters Projektion advertised in the trade paper *Der Kinematograph* for their yet undistributed nonfiction film, *Zeppelin in Berlin* (Fig. 4). The half page ad stated: “We have made the most meticulous preparations as to Graf Zeppelin’s upcoming visit to



Fig. 4. 'Messters Projektion Zeppelin in Berlin', advertisement in *Der Kinematograph*, 1 September 1909.

Berlin to be able to shoot a highly interesting film. Because of the great public interest devoted to the Graf's air travels, one can assume that our film will become extremely popular among audiences [ein Kassenmagnet ersten Ranges]."¹¹ Besides a small insert there were no other editorials, articles or advertisements devoted to this major media event in *Der Kinematograph*. In short, film historical facts in the leading German film trade paper are somewhat numb. One reason is that *Der Kinematograph* was published in Düsseldorf, still the point to be made is that film historical research limiting itself to information in trade papers only, sometimes runs the risk of missing intriguing media historical distribution patterns that an event as the Zeppelin flight incorporated. As a matter of fact, Messter's film *Zeppelin in Berlin* was but one of a numerous visual mediations of Zeppelin's arrival in Berlin on "Zeppelin Sunday". Plenty of photographs and filmed actualities – although not mentioned in *Der Kinematograph* – were shot during the day. The *Berliner Tageblatt* later featured a review of a Zeppelin film by Eclipse for example, screened at the scientific lecture theatre Treptow-Sternwarte.¹² Thus, Messter's film was just one depiction within a major distribution media network disseminating this event to the public in various ways.

Still only on an infrequent basis did the major Berlin newspapers publish anything explicit on moving pictures – not even advertisements. But one of the few exceptions was inserts and notifications on nonfiction films of current events as the Zeppelin event indicates.¹³ The distribution and mediation of nonfiction film was to a large extent dependent on a press discourse on actualities. By and large this is self-evident, still two particular aspects of visual film reports are worth mentioning. Firstly, the rapidity of filmic reports was sometimes stunning. Half a year after the "Zeppelin Sunday", during spring 1910, Edward VII died in London. The next day the cinema chain Union-Theater boasted in the *Berliner Tageblatt*: "in terms of rapid visual reports [schnelle optische Berichterstattung] the Union-Theater stands in a class of its own. Our cinematogra-

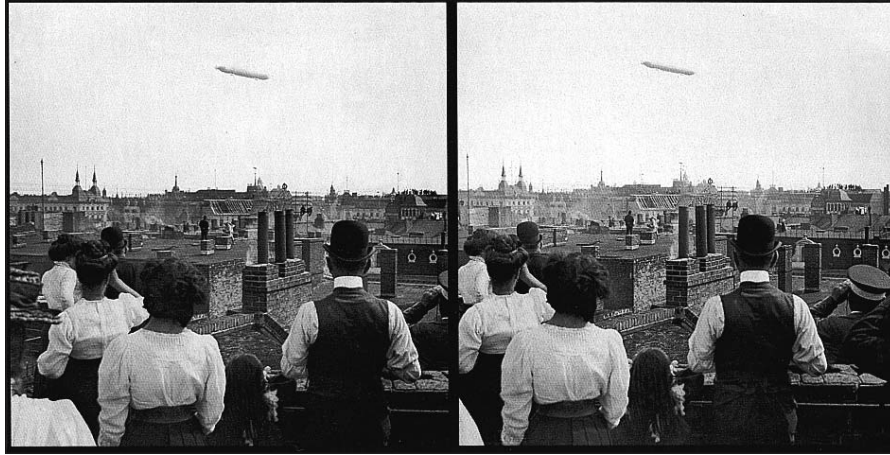


Fig. 5. ‘Zeppelin über Berlin 1909’. Stereoscopic photograph from the Kaiserpanorama series *Zeppelin in Berlin*.

phers are already on their way to London to shoot to upcoming funeral, which only 24 hours thereafter will be shown to our audiences.”¹⁴ Secondly, the German word “anschaulich” was often used in relation to visual reports on film or in other visual media as lantern slides. A filmed aviation event in early 1909 was for example referred to in the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* as depicting the event in an exact way – “der Biograph [führte] ... [die] Flugmanöver anschaulich vor”.¹⁵ The word “anschaulich” – used already to describe the first German illustrated weekly in 1843 – is difficult to translate suggesting a kind of vivid descriptiveness and graphic quality of images. The term is, however, significant since it implies the way photographic media was understood to portray and represent reality, not only in an indexical and documentary way, but also as a representative form of mimetic depiction with media technologies perceived as superior to the human eye.

The discourse around visual reports, “optische Berichterstattung”, suggests that newspapers and film, cinemas and mass cultural venues, illustrated weeklies and mass distributed photographs, slides and stereoscopic views, formed an early media network on actualities. This network was primarily content driven rather than media specific and a range of informational and imagistic interaction took place both at the production and distribution level, as well as among recipient audiences. To understand for example the production and distribution of nonfiction film during the period of early cinema, the printed press, and in particular illustrated weeklies, in fact serve as a kind of blueprint to what was considered important and newsworthy to shoot, produce and distribute on film. This is not surprising but the point is that a broader media historical context surrounding such filmed actualities as Messter’s film *Zeppelin in Berlin*, reframes and recontextualises them, thus, providing the films with new meaning – not the least in terms of how they were perceived and understood by audiences. Clearly, moving pictures were by 1910 not (yet) a contemporary “Leitmedium”, at least not in terms of distribution of events. Other sources hint at a similar interpretation. If one, for example examines the historical directory *Berliner Adreßbuch*, it becomes evident that one has to situate early Berlin cinema within a larger media historical framework. Even by 1910 phonographic companies, not to mention photographic ones, outnumbered film companies. In 1909 only fifty companies dealing with moving pictures were listed in the *Berliner Adreßbuch* – yet four years earlier there had only been ten. Although likely

financed by small fees, the *Berliner Adreßbuch* is a fascinating historical source hinting at the gradual development of an urban public media sphere.

120

it had been prolonged and that telegraphically ordered films from Messina were projected as soon as they arrived: “die telegraphisch bestellten Films über die Erdbebenkatastrophe werden stets nach Eintreffen sofort vorgeführt”.¹⁷

Hence, to conclude one might argue that if moving images today in digitised or televised form set the overall news agenda, this is the result of a media historical process that can be traced back to the previous turn-of-the-century. Indeed, the concept of media event is appropriate for describing how a major current event as the “Zeppelin Sunday” was mediated on a mass scale already in 1909. The distribution of this early media event was not only a concern for the daily press or the medium of film. The illustrated press were during the summer of 1909 filled with images of airships. The high-circulation illustrated weeklies *Die Woche* and *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* featured numerous visual reports. They were, perhaps, the most important mass media in Germany at the time to visually influence people’s views of actualities and events. Beside the illustrated press, post cards with Zeppelin motifs from Berlin were mass produced and distributed. In addition, Zeppelin toys were sold on the streets of Berlin, the vaudeville Berliner Wintergarten included a Zeppelin film in their September program, and August Fuhrmann naturally filled his three Kaiser-Panorama’s in Berlin with hundreds of stereoscopic images of the Zeppelin event as for example the series “Eroberung der Luft” or “Zeppelin in Berlin” (Fig. 5).¹⁸

Various media had in fact constructed the awareness and the attention around the “Zeppelin Sunday” all during spring and summer 1909. Articles and updated reports, illustrations and maps, as well as a lot of graphic advertisement using the public’s interest for Zeppelin had filled the pages of Berlin’s newspapers. The Internationales Porträt-Institut for example, had a returning and quite intriguing ad in a number of the dailies featuring an airship with the portrait of the Graf, as well as a long poem and a quiz (Fig. 6). Graf Zeppelin was well known, he had conducted flying attempts with his airship for nearly ten years. In 1908 there had occurred a major catastrophe: an explosion destroyed the ship “LZ 4”, yet a national fund-raiser provided Zeppelin with new money, and his speech of gratitude to the German people was even recorded on phonograph to be sold.

Hence, already a hundred years ago the public sphere was saturated by mass media forming a variety of “Medienöffentlichkeiten” produced, distributed and received in various ways. A cinematic concept as that on visual reports, “optische Berichterstattung”, clearly has to include other forms of media besides moving pictures. If one examines early nonfiction film of current events, a range of other media has to be taken into consideration. Thus, to fully understand early distribution of mediated news a broad media historical perspective has to be applied.

Notes

1. Mendelssohn, Peter de, *Zeitungsstadt Berlin* (Berlin: Ullstein Verlag, 1959).
2. Fritzsche, Peter, *Reading Berlin 1900* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996).
3. Habermas, Jürgen, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990), 48. Thus, one of the questions facing media historians today is to analyse not so much the rise of the public sphere but the prolongation and continuance of it in and through other media than the printed press. Research attempts in this direction have been undertaken focusing especially the late 20th century and the medium of television. Yet, between 1850 and 1950 there still exists a substantial historical gap essentially unanalysed in terms of understanding the rise of a mass mediated public sphere outside or in relation to the domain of the press. John B. Thompson in his *The Media and Modernity. A Social Theory of the Media* for example, devotes a number of pages to Habermas and the printed press’ importance for establishing a historically situated public sphere. But as he moves on to discuss other forms of mediated public spheres he completely

- ignores all the various established mass media around 1900, including film, and quickly moves on to television. Thompson, John B., *The Media and Modernity. A Social Theory of the Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).
4. The public sphere, “Öffentlichkeit”, is a notorious difficult concept to translate into English. In the following the public sphere is understood as a forum of public discourses. Indeed, the concept is better used in plural, “Öffentlichkeiten”, especially in terms of different public spheres of media. In a German context the concept has been further disseminated, postulating various “Teilöffentlichkeiten” with a difference between “Veranstaltungsöffentlichkeiten” and “Massenmedienöffentlichkeiten”. For a discussion on the concept and its history, see Führer, Karl, Knut Hicketier and Axel Schildt “Öffentlichkeit – Medien – Geschichte. Konzepte der modernen Öffentlichkeit und Zugänge zu ihrer Erforschung”, *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 41. Jg, 2001, 2.
5. Fritzsche, 2.
6. Briesen, Detlef, *Berlin – die überschätzte Metropole* (Köln: Köln universität, 1990), 148.
7. For a discussion on the early 20th century “image” of Berlin, see Kiecol, Daniel, *Selbstbild und Image zweier europäischer Metropolen. Paris und Berlin zwischen 1900 und 1930* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001).
8. For a discussion, see Snickars, Pelle, “Reading Berlin 1909. ‘Medienöffentlichkeit’, Daily Press and Mediated Events”, *Kinoöffentlichkeit 1895–1920* (ed. Corinna Müller) (München: Fink Verlag, forthcoming).
9. Garncarz, Joseph, “The Origins of Film Exhibition in Germany”, *The German Cinema Book* (eds Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter and Deniz Göktürk) (London: Routledge, 2002). See also, Garncarz, Joseph, “Die Entstehung des Kino aus dem Variété: ein Plädoyer für ein erweitertes Konzept der intermedialität” *Intermedialität: Theorie und Praxis eines interdisziplinären Forschungsgebiets* (ed. Jörg Helbig) (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1998).
10. Dayan, Daniel and Katz, Elihu, *Media Events. The Live Broadcasting of History* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992).
11. “Mesters Projektion”, advertisement in *Der Kinematograph*, 1 September 1909.
12. Advertisement for the Treptow-Sternwarte, *Berliner Tageblatt*, 7 September 1909.
13. Regular film advertisement does not seem to have been published in the major Berlin newspapers on a daily basis until late 1910 or early 1911. On the 15 January 1911, for example, the *Berliner Tageblatt* featured large ads – similar to the ones that had been published by vaudeville venues as Wintergarten and Apollo-Theater for years – for the five U.T. Uniontheater cinemas as well as the Mozart-Saal Lichtspiele. The latter, perhaps the most prestigious cinema of Berlin at the time had opened in September 1910. It seemed to have had enough cultural and medial prestige as to be accepted among the “Vergnügungs-Anzeigen”, thus, functioning as a pioneer in terms of film advertisement. For a discussion, see Hanisch, Michael *Auf den Spuren der Filmgeschichte. Berliner Schauplätze* (Berlin: Henschel Verlag, 1991), 217–226.
14. Advertisement for the Union-Theater, *Berliner Tageblatt*, 7 May 1910.
15. “Wintergarten”, unsigned, *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, 4 February 1909.
16. “Kino-Austellung am Zoo”, unsigned, *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, 1 January 1909.
17. Advertisement for the “Kinematographen-Austellung”, *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, 3 January 1909.
18. See returning advertisement for the Kaiser-Panorama during September 1909 in the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*.