

The BIRTH Project

The BIRTH project (Building of an Interactive Research and Delivery Network for Television Heritage) is an EU funded pilot project within the MEDIA+ programme and has established a multimedia, multilingual webportal giving access to audiovisual and textual material on the early days of European television. In this article Alexander Hecht discusses the aims of the project.

The legacy of over 50 years of regular broadcasting in Europe is enormous – in quantity as well as quality. With at least a part of it being made available via the BIRTH webportal, users will get access to an important part of their own personal history. The European angle makes the approach even more tempting for academics and the general public.

Our idea was to create an entry point into the world of audiovisual testimonies we keep in our archives. The basic idea of BIRTH is to set up a long living platform that serves as an information point for the interested user and as forum for scientific exchange. Thus BIRTH can be seen as a B2C (Business to Consumer) and B2P (Business to Partner) orientated project.

The project consortium

The consortium includes Joanneum Research as the project manager, the TV archives of the BBC (UK), ORF (Austria), RTBF (Belgium) and SWR (Germany) and the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision as content providing partners. Noterik (Netherlands) is our technical partner. BIRTH started on 1 January 2003 and is a three year project. Basic information about the partners and the project workplan can be found at our interim webpage <http://www.birth-of-tv.org>. During a first presentation on the project webportal during the FIAT/IFTA World Conference in Paris (<http://www.fiatifta.org/conferences/conferences/>) in October this year the positive feedback from several representatives of the audiovisual archive sector showed that the number of contributing organisations and individuals will soon increase.

User Groups Survey

One of the main tasks at the beginning of the project was to define the future user groups of the BIRTH webservice in order to shape the service according to their needs. Three user groups were defined: a) general public, b) academic world and c) professional users. A user group survey was undertaken and about

200 subjects were asked to fill out a comprehensive questionnaire.

The results showed that the three user groups do have very specific expectations with respect to the future BIRTH website. These results were published in two project delivery papers: 'Preliminary Specification User-Requirements' and 'Final Specification User-Requirements'.

The following overview gives an idea about what the expectations of the user groups are:

Public Expectations

The concept and nature of the BIRTH website drew a lot of interest from the public, often giving rise to what they would like to see and the possible functionalities.

- Accurate and reliable information
- Efficiency in access and download.
- Access to rights information
- Ability to switch between text based searching and keyframes
- Sufficient quality of picture to make judgements and see timecode
- Moderation and registration acceptable
- Shopping basket and cutting tool

Academic Expectations

The academic group's expectations were more focused around what the site could offer from an educational perspective.

- Timeline oriented and searchable
- View content online
- Save items or references to them
- Shopping basket functionality
- Description of visual content
- Fun element e.g. quizzes and games
- Newsgroup or chat rooms on early television
- Opportunity to provide feedback on content

Professional Expectations

This group was very clear about what they expected from the website. Their interests related directly to how the site could improve on, and enhance, their needs.

- A source of reliable information
- Inclusion of content into course work for students
- Contribute articles
- Moderate newsgroups
- Possibly accept some fees for enhanced services and content
- Not keen on advertising to sustain website
- Willing to register to enter the site

We will try to satisfy most of these needs when setting up our webservice. The main focus of the BIRTH site will be to meet the information of an interested general public, and the exchange of ideas and research of the academic world. Furthermore, we want to offer an overview of the (programme) history



The Super-Emitron camera in action at the cup final at Wembley stadium, 1938.



Eve Becks in Picture Page, Baird Studio, Alexander Palace 1936.

of the contributing partners for professionals.

KBAs – Knowledge Based Articles

Users will find audiovisual content on the webportal as well as scientific articles on various aspects of European broadcasting history. These so called 'Knowledge Based Articles' will cover the following topics:

- The technical challenges behind the first broadcast
- Behind the scenes: production of early television
- Major technical developments (towards colour TV)
- The history of broadcast archives
- Eurovision broadcasts: the European angle (exchanges)
- Government influence in the first era of television
- Politics adopting early TV (how politicians learned to live with/ to use TV)
- Taboos in early TV (controversial TV and censorship)
- The early stars of the television screen
- Impact of TV on radio, cinema and other media
- For kids only: children's programmes
- The era of television plays
- Music programmes in early TV
- The Treasure Hunt: Lost and found treasures from the archives
- Bringing the daily news & weather into the homes of millions
- Major dates in your early TV's history

These articles are ideal for stimulating cooperation between the content producers and the scientific community. In Austria for example students and teachers from the Institute for Communication Science at the University of Vienna will produce texts for the BIRTH portal and this will provide a

new digital platform for publication at their service.

Under the lead of representatives of the Utrecht University a European academic network dealing with TV history was set up in October 2004. At the moment academics from Austria, UK, Belgium, France and the Netherlands have joined the network. It's a European network of academics and institutes who are active in the field of European television history. The network provides a platform for individuals and institutions to exchange experiences and research data. The goal is to link the various European research activities in the field of television history. For information about a planned workshop on TV history in early 2005, please contact Prof Sonja de Leeuw, email: sonja.deleeuw@let.uu.nl or Dr Andreas Fickers, email: andreas.fickers@let.uu.nl.

Multilingual

The BIRTH project will be multilingual, so one key feature in the project structure is that all the KBAs will be available in the native language of the author and in English. The same approach is used for setting up a thesaurus used for cataloguing and searching of/in the BIRTH metadata. The Thesaurus Tool programmed by Joanneum Research offers language versions in English, German, French and Dutch.

The audiovisual content

As mentioned above, audiovisual archives hold the memory of more than five decades. For a long time forgotten or neglected by historical sciences, television has become the mass medium of the second half of the 20th century. Thus the content delivery partner will contribute audiovisual material that illustrates not only their respective company's history and programme

development but also the main events of European interest.

The video files are digitised in low resolution quality (Windows Media and/or Real Video) and stored on servers in the respective country of origin. This decentralised structure is necessary to meet all the legal restriction many partners still face if it comes to putting audiovisual content online. The content partners of BIRTH will deliver over 500 clippings from their archive material as a basis of our audiovisual stock. The numbers of institutions contributing to the BIRTH website will be expanded in the future and hopefully will grow into a representative European platform. Besides the video files the user will also find stills and pdf files of scanned programme guides on the BIRTH webportal. Thus a wide range of different information sources will be made available online.

Legal aspects

While working for the project it soon became very clear that it was not the technical challenges that were the most difficult to face, but the legal restrictions. The consortium unites partners in whose national legislations vary in their laws on making (audiovisual) material available online. The spectrum ranges from an umbrella clause in Dutch law that makes online publication easy for non-commercial use to a very strict German legal situation where it is only possible to publish audiovisual files when used for citation purposes.

The front-end of the webportal

Many functionalities will be included in the front-end of the BIRTH webportal: browsing, full text search, thesaurus search, timeline search and others. The general access to the portal will be opened in December 2004. From one single point, the user will be able to view material from several European archives.

The project consortium always welcomes new partners for the BIRTH webportal as one of the main goals is to widen the audiovisual pool of content on offer as soon as possible. Increasing in scope (covering more geographical regions) and time (covering a larger timespan).

If you wish to know more about the BIRTH project, contact alexander.hecht@orf.at.

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Birth of TV

If you want to get into touch with the project management, please contact Mr Harald Mayer from Joanneum Research in Graz (A), email: harald.mayer@joanneum.at, you can also subscribe to the BIRTH mailinglist at birth@beeldengeluid.nl.