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Digital humanities and environmental reporting in television during the Cold War Methodological issues of exploring materials of the Estonian, Finnish, Swedish, Danish, and British broadcasting companies

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Environmental history studies have relied on traditional historical archival and other related source materials so far. Despite the increasing availability of new digitized materials studies in this field have not reacted to these emerging opportunities in any particular way. The aim of the proposed paper is to discuss possibilities and limitations that are embodied in the new digitized source materials in different European countries. The proposed paper is an outcome of a research project that explores the early days of television prior to the Earth Day in 1970 and frame this exploration from an environmental perspective. The focus of the project is reporting of environmental pollution and protection during the Cold War. I had originally planned a comparative study of environmental broadcasting in the Baltic Sea Region including western democracies and a Communist state. In order to realize this study the quantity and quality of related digitized and non-digitized source materials provided by the national broadcasting companies of Estonia (ETV), Finland (YLE), Sweden (SVT), Denmark (DR), and United Kingdom (BBC) were examined. However, realising a comparative project proved impossible. Only a few programs on environmental topics from Soviet times were found in the archives of Estonian television (ETV) that were otherwise superb and easy to use. The Swedish television (SVT) archives, on the other hand, censored its qualitative bodies of data by denying access to printed content reports. Danish television (DR) was very helpful and provided requested content reports without any limitations. In addition, a visit was made to the renowned BBC television archives in Reading, England. But the BBC’s archival material from the early days was of poor quality, and their content reports had not been digitized. The data contained in the archives managed by Finnish Public Broadcasting (YLE) and by Danish television (DR) proved, thus, to be a superb source for this research. The main outcome of this international comparative study of available sources is that the quantity and quality of available materials varies greatly, even in a surprising way between the examined countries that belonged to different political spheres (Warsaw Pact, neutral, NATO) during the Cold War. Hence I am not suggesting abandoning the virtues of old-school historical methodology. Rather I propose combining the best of the old-school approaches and the potential of the new school to look for a wider array of source materials, alternative methods for searching for and processing information, and new channels for publishing and popularizing results.

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