

## The history of the German Press Agency dpa

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### 1. 1945 – 1949: Laying the Foundations

In 1949, three months after the proclamation of the Basic Law (constitution) of the Federal Republic of Germany and four days after the first parliamentary elections, the Deutsche Presse-Agentur GmbH was founded in the city of Goslar.

Prior to that, the defeat of the Nazi regime in Germany had marked the end of the state-run news agency "DNB Nachrichten Büro". After Germany's capitulation, the build-up of regional agencies in the occupation zones began under the direct supervision of Allied press officers, with many German emigrants involved. These agencies supplied the newspapers and radio stations which were steadily being licensed by the Allied powers.

The British forces transferred the German navy supreme command's telecommunications unit to Hamburg. It was there that on January 1, 1947, the "DPD Deutscher Pressedienst" was established, with Fritz Sanger as the first editor-in-chief and managing director. The agency was handed over to German publishers and, under British control, was financed by newspapers. Each was obliged to contribute 5 per cent of revenue. In the American occupation zone, the DENA "Deutsche Nachrichtenagentur" was newly established and licensed as a cooperative on October 26, 1946. After dpa was founded, DENA developed into a technical services unit with the task of servicing news agencies and the media and it continued to operate transmitters for the dissemination of agency services until 1998.

In the French occupation zone, the media were served by the agency "Rheina" which initially operated from Paris. This was succeeded on March 4, 1947 by the "Südena Südwestdeutsche Nachrichtenagentur". After the currency reform of 1948, German publishers were permitted to take a stake in "Südena" which signed a cooperation agreement with DENA in Bad Nauheim in August 1949.

The currency reform that summer had so fundamentally changed the economic prospects of the fledgling news agencies that cooperation between them became inevitable. Only 36 hours after the decision to merge the DENA and Südena agencies, the decision was made on August 19, 1949 to merge them with DPD – thereby establishing dpa. The start-up capital was 350,000 Deutschmarks.

The newspaper publishers who gathered at the Achtermann Hotel in Goslar made use of a freedom which the Allied powers went on to formally approve on September 21. The Allies' new press law abolished mandatory licences and within the space of only 10 weeks 400 new newspapers had appeared on the German market. Meanwhile, in the Soviet occupation zone in eastern Germany, the "ADN Allgemeine Deutsche Nachrichtendienst" had been established. In 1953, ADN became an official organ of the socialist German Democratic Republic and was directly answerable to the premier. A decree in 1966 obliged all ADN employees to observe the communist party line. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in late 1989, what remained of ADN was merged into the Deutsche Depeschen Dienst (ddp) news agency.

## **2. Difficult Beginnings, Rapid Growth**

The start of the Deutsche Presse-Agentur in 1949 was a difficult one. The agency lacked almost everything, including funds, communications equipment, paper and adequate space. There were not even enough chairs to go round at the central newsroom in Hamburg.

It was at 6 a.m. on September 1, 1949 that dpa began transmission. The new agency had moved into the former Royal Bavarian legation building which has been left largely unscathed by the war and which DPD had previously taken over. The white-painted villa at Mittelweg 38 was purchased in 1963 and extended in 1965. A new office building across the street was acquired in 1996. dpa began with the central news desk in Hamburg, its photo services headquarters in Frankfurt, seven state bureaux and 19 smaller regional bureaux. Over the years, this organizational structure was steadily expanded in order to ensure the reporting and transmission of domestic news throughout the country. In 1990 the network was expanded virtually overnight to include bureaux and correspondents in the former East Germany.

In the field of international news coverage, dpa initially found a strong partner in the British agency Reuters. Step by step however dpa appointed its own correspondents in key cities abroad, starting with London. This was followed by new dpa bureaux in Paris, Amsterdam, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Washington, Rome, Madrid and Vienna. In 1957, dpa was able to send correspondents to Moscow and Warsaw, in 1964 to the Chinese capital Beijing.

The partnership with Reuters came to an end in 1970-71. The gap was filled by the news and photo-reporting services of the American news agency United Press International (UPI). From 1988 onwards dpa was strong enough internationally to stand-alone. Today, the German Press



Agency dpa has a comprehensive network of its own correspondents and contributors from around the world. It offers high quality, independent reporting which satisfies the information needs of clients both at home and abroad.

Business and economic news reporting was initially covered by the "VWD Vereinigte Wirtschaftsdienst GmbH", in which dpa had a one-third stake. In 1981, dpa set up its own economic news desk, which nevertheless continued to cooperate with VWD. On January 1, 1994, dpa sold its VWD stake and has since organized its own national and international economic news reporting using its own resources. Since then economic and business news reporting has been integrated into the news operations in Germany, Brussels and beyond. This was a strategic move, which reflects today's increasingly complex economic developments and the growing importance of economic news for the general public.

With the establishment of "dpa-AFX Wirtschaftsnachrichten GmbH" in Frankfurt in 1999 dpa rose to the challenge of meeting the demand for reliable and market-oriented economic news, solid background information from the business sector and up-to-the-minute data. dpa's partner is London-based AFX, a joint venture of the Financial Times and the French news agency Agence-France-Presse (AFP).

Partnerships with agencies in around 70 countries around the world ensure that dpa provides international reporting excellence around-the-clock and from every region of every continent.

Europe is increasingly becoming a major focal point of dpa's news coverage. Long before the politicians came to terms with "globalization", global concepts had become a reality at the German Press Agency Deutsche Presse-Agentur. The agency has consistently employed highly qualified local journalists overseas and together with dpa's staff correspondents these journalists bring their own special experience, knowledge and viewpoints to bear on their reporting.

These mixed teams of local journalists and dpa correspondents are to be found particularly in Third World countries.

Whenever there is a special news focus or major events to be covered dpa sends along special correspondents with specialised experts. If necessary complete teams of dpa editorial and photo staff are deployed to where the news is happening: Summit conferences, party conventions, major scientific congresses, armed conflict, U.N. peacekeeping missions, natural disasters, football world championships or Olympic games, are just a few examples.

The task facing dpa today consists of maintaining the high quality of news coverage while at the same time adapting to the transformation of the media market. In the 21st Century dpa has also embarked on a comprehensive restructuring programme.

### **3. From Wireless Code to Microelectronics**

Electric transmission technology was the decisive element in the setting up of news agencies, as we know them today.

In 1849 Bernhard Wolff founded a "Telegraphenbüro" or telegraph office in Berlin. And ever since



Julius Reuter began the commercial telegraphic transmission of news to customers in London in 1851 the success of news agencies has been inseparable from the consistent application of the latest technology.

Over the past 60 years the technology used by dpa has undergone a complete transformation. Only those agencies with fast and dependable transmission channels are able to provide clients with reliable, real-time reports from the places where news is happening.

Cable technology, radio valves, relays and wireless telegraphy were the technological milestones in the first half of the 20th Century. In the second half progress was fuelled by transistors, satellites, integrated circuits, computers and fibre-optics.

In recent years microelectronics, microprocessors and virtually unlimited data storage volume have added a new dimension to news agency technology.

The result is the digitalized gathering and processing of news using stationary or mobile workstations and transmission via wireless telephone, satellites and the Internet.

Of course the situation was completely different when dpa started up in 1949. The news services in the respective zones of occupation each brought along their own technology. A long-wave transmitter – originally used by the German Wehrmacht army for the "Paula" radio station – was DENA's most important asset. British navy technicians brought teletype equipment from Flensburg to Hamburg and set up a teletype network. Thus the fledgling agency had a wired network in the north, a so-called "Hellschreiber" wireless long-wave transmitter in Frankfurt and a postal wire network in Baden-Baden in the southwest of the country.

When the photo service began transmitting in 1957 it too made use of long-wave signals. For a long time dpa's foreign services used a range of short-wave transmissions all operating parallel to each other. Improvements in technology and further expansion enabled dpa to convert to a single standardized radio teletype transmission system in 1962. What began as a short-wave transmitter at DENA, with five directional antennae, evolved during the heyday of radio transmission technology in the 1960s into a worldwide network of short-wave stations. In 1968, dpa broadcast news reports to America, Africa and Asia news via its short-wave transmitters on several channels at a speed of 50 baud (6.66 impulses per second). The daily volume of traffic was 82 hours of news broadcast in five languages.

In the modern age of computers and online services the laptop has often replaced the notepad and pencil. Correspondents report live from the scene of events – from conference halls, press rooms and sports stadiums – and feed their copy into dpa's central computer. The digitalization of dpa's entire photo reporting service also aids modern news reporting. In places where the communication infrastructure is poor portable satellite phones can be used to transmit text, photo and audio reports. The agency has also grown a lot since those early days. It now has more than 2,500 customers in 100 countries, including 75 national news agencies and offers wire services in four languages (German, English, Spanish and Arabic) – around-the-clock, via satellite or the Internet.

#### **4. 1989/1990 - dpa and German Reunification**

For a period of 40 years dpa found it easier to report from such far-flung places as Cambodia or Angola than it did from neighbouring communist East Germany. It was a virtual blank spot in the agency's coverage despite its major importance. For decades both dpa and other western media had been accused of allowing themselves to be deceived about the true conditions in the east. Even after dpa opened a bureau in East Berlin in 1973 and its correspondent was accredited, the situation remained unsatisfactory. Finding interview partners outside the circle of functionaries of the East German SED communist party was difficult and beset with risks. Moreover, every reporting trip outside the Berlin area was subject to approval by the authorities. Correspondents were under surveillance everywhere they went.

It may seem an amusing anecdote but an example typifies the situation back then: After the collapse of the communist system in East Germany, archives of the former State Security (Stasi) secret service apparatus revealed a comprehensive report by an agent writing about a dpa reception to mark a change of correspondents in East Berlin. Its author missed nothing – the welcoming remarks by the dpa editor-in-chief were included along with the list of guests, and even details of the small talk conducted among them at the buffet table.

On November 9, 1989 the Berlin Wall came down. Even before the historic "Two plus Four Negotiations" and the reunification treaty between east and west had formally sealed Germany's unification, dpa had forged ahead with its plans in eastern Germany. A merger with the former socialist agency ADN was out of the question – dpa chose instead to make a fresh start in the east using its own resources. Despite all the problems encountered in the new states in the east, a highly effective infrastructure was set up with a central news bureau in Berlin-Mitte, the old heart of Berlin, along with 14 bureaux in Rostock, Schwerin, Neubrandenburg, Frankfurt-an-der-Oder, Potsdam, Cottbus, Dresden, Chemnitz, Leipzig, Erfurt, Gera, Suhl, Halle and Magdeburg.

As early as November 1989 - the month in which the Berlin Wall came tumbling down - the monopoly on information once accorded to the ADN agency was simply ignored; dpa offered the media in the German Democratic Republic direct access to dpa material. In February 1990, the "Thüringer Allgemeine" in Erfurt became the first eastern German newspaper to print dpa stories and photos. Within the space of a few months dpa services found their way into newspapers, TV and radio stations throughout eastern Germany and despite the dilapidated state of the country's telecommunications infrastructure. dpa quickly became a leading and recognized source of news.

On January 1, 1991 five new dpa services with regional news from the new federal states started up their operations in the east. The foundations for photo-reporting in the five new states were also laid with the newly-created "zb Zentralbild GmbH" photo agency which had been established by former employees of the AND agency from that agency's photo department. In 1990, dpa acquired a 75 per cent stake in the agency and the remaining 25 per cent in September 1992. Since then this dpa subsidiary based in Berlin has been successfully operating with both its own photographers as well as numerous freelancers, above all in the eastern German states. It also offers the eastern German media additional regional photo services, while producing the dpa Sportreport service that is marketed throughout Germany. During a transitional phase, dpa established a subsidiary company, "dpa-Agenturdienste GmbH", a service, which organized the text reporting in and from the new states and at the same time assumed the marketing of dpa services in eastern Germany. In 1997 this subsidiary was dissolved and merged into the parent



company. During this period of upheaval in the early reunification period in eastern Germany, numerous employees, journalists and technicians from the five new states joined dpa. They brought with them considerable energy, expertise and detailed knowledge of the situation in their home region. As a result, dpa succeeded quickly in integrating employees from east and west - a success story in its own right.

In 1999 further steps were taken to secure the future of dpa's position in the capital Berlin and throughout eastern Germany. A new regional bureau was set up in Leipzig, where news services aimed at customers in the states of Saxony, Thuringia, Saxony-Anhalt and Mecklenburg-West Pomerania were edited. In the central Berlin district of Berlin-Mitte, dpa moved into new offices where an array of agency activities was concentrated. Owing to its proximity to the Reichstag parliament and other government buildings the focus is on national news coverage. At the same time the facility is home to the Berlin-Brandenburg regional news service, which includes intensive coverage of news from the capital itself, along with production of the dpa/Rufa audio reporting service and other radio-related services. The "zb-Fotoagentur Zentralbild GmbH" is also based in Berlin. Since 2000, the domestic German editorial desk Politik Deutschland has been based in the Berlin office – it is the only central news desk operation outside of the Hamburg headquarters.

## **5. Thousands of Employees – Millions of News Reports**

The mass of computer systems around the globe, including those used to convey news stories and pseudo-news, can sometimes obscure the human element in newsgathering and above all the role played by journalists.

In the 21st Century there can however be no doubt that a news agency such as dpa relies first and foremost on the staff in its many newsrooms, on its management and its technical support staff.

From the outset dpa placed great emphasis on the quality of its staff and since then standards have steadily improved. The postwar start-up of the predecessor agencies DPD, DENA and Südena and latterly of dpa was difficult, partly because the workforce had to be built up from scratch. Since the early days dpa has trained its own staff using in-house programmes. The proportion of graduates among trainees has risen continually, as has the number of women. As of 2004, some 30 per cent of dpa journalists are female. When the German media began discussing moves towards standardising and formalising journalistic training, dpa was opposed, insisting that the profession remain as open as possible.

Assembling teams from the widest possible variety of backgrounds serves the specific interests of a news agency very well. dpa hires graduates in disciplines as diverse as economics, history, science, Slavic studies, theology, political studies and music along with highly motivated persons with vocational experience in other professions. In the 60<sup>th</sup> year of its existence, the dpa group employs some 920 men and women. The total goes up to around 1,050 if the subsidiary companies are included. In addition dpa makes use of freelancers throughout Germany and around the world, generating text news, photos, audio and graphic content. Their output not only supplies dpa customers with coverage of daily events, but also ensures the growth of dpa's valuable databases of text and photographic material.

## 6. News Agencies: Both Rivals and Partners

None of the world news agencies can function without a dependable network of partnerships around the globe, both with other journalists and in telecommunications. For more than 50 years, dpa has been improving this network. In some sectors, rival agencies agree to cooperate for the sake of the benefits to all the parties. Throughout its history, Deutsche Presse-Agentur has had to prevail against strong competition, protected neither by borders and walls nor by any language barrier. It not only had to win over customers, but also obtain partners willing to campaign jointly for the industry's mutual interests. dpa did so on various levels, for example by taking an active role in the European Alliance of Agencies, a forum for the intensive and open exchange of experience and to draw up joint initiatives. dpa is also a member of the FIEJ federation of European publishers and has a leading role in the International Press Telecommunications Council (IPTC), which develops common technical standards to improve the work of news agencies and their customers worldwide.

As a member of the International Press Institute (IPI), dpa supports efforts to protect and expand press freedom along with unobstructed access to international news. Along with most other western news agencies, dpa campaigned in the 1970s against efforts to establish the "New World Information Order" that was being advocated by UNESCO and others. Those efforts would effectively have sanctioned government control of the media and of news coverage. The New World Information Order blueprint was ultimately abandoned.

Various political initiatives in West Germany in the 1970s to pass a federal framework law regulating the press similarly came to nothing. Their supporters sought to standardize the relationship between journalists and publishers. It was pointed out to them that dpa, with its special role and the enhanced status of its editor in chief and editorial team, did not fit in with the bureaucratic concept enshrined in the proposed national law. Improving European cooperation was behind dpa's lead in the EPA project to pool photographic coverage provided by the various European news agencies. Unifying around a dozen news agencies, all of them driven by different primary interests, behind this joint venture proved to be a difficult task but has ultimately succeeded despite all the controversy along the way.

dpa also plays a coordinating role in issues involving the German language, both settling definitions and prescribing standard German transcriptions from other writing systems of proper names and new terms. Its partner agencies in Switzerland and Austria assist in this work as well as dpa's direct competitors providing German-language newscasts. This standardization meets a need among customers, with dpa playing a special role as a "multiplier" of new terms. dpa also consults with other agencies producing in German on the rules to be used in spelling native German words.

## 7. Journalistic Standards

Agency journalists are called upon on every day to grasp the essence of the news and to report on it as accurately as possible. Their customers along with millions of readers, Internet users and viewers must be able to rely on this information in order to form their own opinions and take decisions. This search for truthfulness, a dpa commitment, starts with neutrality in the use of language. Non-biased language was of major importance at dpa's post war predecessor agencies



where Allied mentors impressed the need for German journalists to work in accordance with the highest journalistic principles. Stripping out bias and striving for neutral terminology has been a basic part of a journalist's work at dpa ever since that time.

Deutsche Presse-Agentur dpa serves mainly the mass media, which means that millions of readers, listeners and viewers from all walks of life must be able to understand the news reports. The jargon used by diplomats, politicians, civil servants and scientists has to be "translated" by journalists into understandable language without corrupting the substance.

A headline should accurately reflect the content of the news item. The first sentence, known to agency journalists as the "lead", must be clear in meaning, easily read and verbally compelling so as to arouse the interest of the reader or listener. Agency news therefore has to use clear, direct language, with short sentences and a minimum of technical or academic terminology. It must avoid exaggeration and avoid bias. Only reports, which carry a correspondent's by line, are allowed to contain some element of personal interpretation. Separating news and opinion is a constant topic of discussion within the editorial team.

When facts, numbers, names and quotations appear to require further confirmation they are carefully checked. This is done by contacting sources or by utilising the full range of dpa's vast information resources, contained both in its archives and database of past news stories. Reporters keep records of interviews, debates, news conferences or remarks in order to ensure that quotations are accurate and complete.

In politics truth is often like a coin with two sides and so space has to be made available for contrary opinions. While news reports must be without bias, the agency must not, shy away from explaining the significance of events to readers once all the facts are known. The fundamental principles of accurate reporting play a major role in the training of dpa journalists, ensuring that their skills and judgement can be relied upon. Within Germany dpa coverage has an enormous multiplier effect, something that is always borne in mind by dpa copy editors who are of course open to constructive criticism.

This also applies to the gatekeeper role that the agency plays when choosing the topics to be picked up for reporting from the flood of stories on offer. The guiding consideration is always the relevance of a topic for the general public. Terrible events must be covered on a daily basis – including wars, disasters, scandals, crime, controversy, corruption, unemployment, higher taxes or extremes of weather. Such news is indispensable for the media. Experience has shown that newspapers that restrict themselves to reporting only the good and uplifting have had a very poor survival rate.

## **8. The News Agency Constitution**

The work of a news agency has its foundation in a constitution: a formal document which sets out the principles of how it operates, its form of legal incorporation, its structures and the responsibilities of its officers. dpa's founding fathers provided this in the form of a mutual contract in 1949 and its main principles remain unchanged to this day. The aim was not to set up a state news agency such as those in many countries, which maintain a government monopoly on the supply of news. A statutory incorporation on the lines of a public broadcaster was not sought either.



It was the desire for a cooperative form, which led to dpa being established as a limited liability company. The founding fathers of the agency believed this form of incorporation would both encourage the media to manage its affairs in their common interest and ensure adequate entrepreneurial freedom for the agency. The result was that dpa was set up as a joint enterprise belonging to the German media.

Its shareholders decide on fundamental issues and elect a supervisory board from among themselves. The board appoints the chief executive and the editor-in-chief and exercises broad supervision of both editorial and business issues at the agency. Sub-committees of the board monitor specific aspects of dpa operations.

The board reflects the wide variety of German media, ranging from small, local newspapers to large publishing groups and from public broadcasting corporations to privately owned radio and TV stations. The constitution bars any shareholder from holding more than 1.5 per cent of the issued shares. This figure was initially set at 1 per cent. Amid the many mergers in the news and information sector this rule has prevented media conglomerates from gaining a dominant influence within dpa. Another stipulation bars broadcasters from collectively holding more than 25 per cent of the issued shares.

The commitment to independence enshrined in the mutual contract is not only binding on the shareholders but also on the staff, particularly the journalists. The undertaking to be impartial is set out in employment contracts and it has proved valuable amid turbulent times for the media.