

Auntie Beep and the Orferl | ORF for Everyone

by Wolfgang Geissler



Auntie Beep

It's natural for the Austro – British Society to draw parallels between the BBC and the ORF. The BBC, affectionately known by the Brits as "Auntie Beeb," and the ORF, humorously referred to as the "Orferl," are both significant public broadcasters.

The BBC is more than just a broadcaster; it's a cultural phenomenon, a symbol of quality and diversity. Since its inception in 1922 as a radio broadcaster, it has evolved into Europe's largest public broadcasting corporation. While occasionally criticized in the UK, it is revered on the continent like a monarch on their throne.

Why? Perhaps because the BBC served as a model for public broadcasters. After World War II, many countries looked up to it and thought, "We could do that too!" Austria was no exception. The idea was to promote political discourse, and the BBC provided a shining example of that.

One often highlighted point is its funding. Imagine, it foregoes any advertising! Instead, it finances itself solely through fees. A budget of €5.5 billion per year is no small matter. But what's interesting is how transparently it handles this, by publishing detailed reports on income, expenditure, and even the salaries of its employees and stars. That's hard to imagine with other broadcasters!

The ORF is mainly funded by broadcasting fees collected from Austrian households, but also through advertising. These fees are mandatory and are determined by the Broadcasting Fee Regulation. The new ORF household fee replaces the previous GIS fee (broadcasting fee) from 2024 onwards.

The transition on January 1, 2024, not only brought about a new financing model but also increased transparency regarding salaries and regulated secondary employment of ORF personnel as well as their social media activities through a code of ethics. Regarding ORF funding, 2/3 comes from the household fee and 1/3 from advertising. As every household in Austria is billed through the household fee, we all are contributors to the ORF. Therefore, the ORF FOR EVERYONE was proclaimed simultaneously.

In contrast, the BBC is financed through a combination of broadcasting fees (TV Licence Fee), commercial revenues, and commercial activities. The broadcasting fees are paid by British households owning television sets and are also mandatory. The amount of the broadcasting fee is determined by the British government.

Of course, there are criticisms as well. Politics may exert too much influence on the BBC. Every ten years, the Minister for Media creates the Royal Charter, which then sets out the BBC's strategic objectives. This can lead to tensions, especially when it comes to issues like independence and objectivity.

The ORF is a public-law institution of the federal government, regulated by its own ORF Act. Leadership is in the hands of a director-general appointed by the Foundation Board. This board, consisting of political representatives, representatives of civil society, and ORF employees, is the supreme supervisory body.

On the other hand, the BBC is an independent public broadcaster established by Royal Charter and was regulated until 2017 by the BBC Trust. Since then, it has been regulated by the BBC Board. Leadership is in the hands of a director-general appointed by the BBC Board. The BBC is organized into various departments and services covering different aspects of program production and administration. External oversight comes from the government and the Ofcom regulatory authority.

Overall, the position of the BBC in the UK resembles that of the ORF in Austria, where both public broadcasters exert significant influence.

The Orferl

Now, let's talk about the ORF, the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation. It has a long and multifaceted history closely intertwined with the development of broadcasting in Austria. The first broadcast of the broadcaster "RAVAG" was aired in 1924 from the top floor of the Ministry of War on Stubenring.

Remember the broadcasting house on Argentinierstraße? Yes, that was essentially the origin. The construction of the first Austrian broadcasting house in Vienna's 4th district was decided on March 27, 1935, according to plans by Clemens Holzmeister, Heinrich Schmid, and Hermann Aichinger. Construction began on October 17, and by 1938, it was completed. It was an asymmetrical facility with smooth facades and a three-part main entrance with an attached staircase, designed with neoclassical elements.

Then, in the 1960s, came the major move to the Küniglberg, marking not only a new location but also a new chapter in the ORF's history.

The earliest home of television was a former school building in Meidlinger Singrienergasse. From May 1955, the broadcasts of the "experimental program" were aired from there. By the mid-1960s, the television facilities were scattered throughout Vienna. In the spring of 1968, construction began on the ORF Center on the K niglberg.

The ORF Center on the K niglberg is more than just a building; it's the heart of Austrian broadcasting. It's where ideas are born and programs are produced that resonate with people in Austria. It has a long list of radio and television programs that have shaped the cultural life of the country.

In 2014, the ORF Foundation Council decided to consolidate all Vienna ORF locations in the K niglberg Center, the protected Roland-Rainer building complex. A major challenge that began in 2019 and ended with the completion of the Multimedia Newsroom in 2022. A step towards the future to ensure that the ORF continues to play a significant role in the Austrian media landscape.

With its 4 TV channels, 12 radio stations, the ORF.at network, 9 regional studios, a global correspondent network, the TVthek, TELETEXT, and much more, the ORF provides its audience with comprehensive public broadcasting programming on television, radio, and online. More than 90% of Austrians use one of the ORF's offerings daily. Currently, the ORF is developing the ORF PLAYER for streaming its programmes.

Both the BBC and the ORF have left indelible marks on their respective nations' media landscapes, serving as pillars of public broadcasting and sources of information, entertainment, and cultural enrichment for their audiences. Their histories, funding models, and organizational structures may differ, but their commitment to quality programming and serving the public interest remains steadfast. As we continue to navigate the evolving media landscape, the roles of institutions like the BBC and the ORF remain vital in upholding democratic values and fostering informed citizenry.

The ABS is looking forward to receiving your views and comments!



About the author

Wolfgang Geissler is a Board Member of the Austro-British Society, its Treasurer and a Committee Member of the United Kingdom Citizens in Europe. He has lived and worked for 40 years in the United Kingdom.

The opinions expressed in this article are entirely his and reflect in no way the views of the ABS.