In September 2014, the Georg Eckert Institute launched a new project on “Educational Films in the Interwar Period”, funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. The project team, consisting of Prof. Eckhardt Fuchs, Michael Annegarn-Gläß and Anne Bruch, is exploring the introduction of educational film as a new medium in Germany, France and Italy between 1918 and 1939.

In December 1895, the Brothers Lumière held their first public screening of films at the Salon Indien du Grand Café in Paris. This presentation – considered to be the beginning of modern cinematography – featured ten short documentaries showing scenes from daily life. The popularity of these short films almost immediately stirred up the interest of educators and teachers. They regarded this new medium as an important tool with which to enforce innovative teaching and learning processes and throughout Europe and the United States of America different institutions were founded. One of these was the Kinematographische Reformvereinigung which was established in a small town in Brandenburg as early as 1907. This association published and distributed a first catalogue listing films for educational purposes and promoted the use of film in classrooms.

The significance of educational films as well as the accompanying debate increased from the early 1920s onwards. Several official organisations,
like the Bildstelle at the Zentralinstitut für Erziehung und Unterricht (Berlin, 1919), the Italian L’Unione Cinematografica Educativa (L.U.C.E., Rome, 1924) and the Offices du cinéma scolaire et éducateur in France, as well as associations and journals were created and international conferences held. Even the League of Nations established its own prestigious International Educational Cinematograph Institute in Rome in 1928. But although widely used in classrooms and universities, these early educational films constitute an ignored corpus of relevant sources of film history as well as film studies. This is due to the assumption that film scholars have historically tended to regard these educational films as aesthetically less valuable and too formulaic.  

The project aims to challenge this supposition by analysing not only the high-level debate on educational films which involved teachers, educators and academics, but also the content of the material. By comparing the implementation of classroom films in Germany, France and Italy we seek to examine whether the introduction of films to lessons was a European-wide phenomenon, and if so, to what extent this was the case in the respective countries.

With an historic examination of the “new media” phenomenon we aim to broaden the view of the current debate in two ways. First it allows (from the perspective of the period) for an analysis of similar reactions to, and strategies for dealing with, new media, which, the hypothesis assumes, do not intrinsically differ in content or orientation from those of the current debate. Second, it offers a retrospective response to the question of how new media influence teaching and learning contexts in the medium-term.

Additionally we will investigate how new knowledge content was confronted by educational policies, teaching staff and the film producers, and whether this new media format led to any alteration in teaching content or method, and if so, in what respect. To achieve this end we are studying examples of the representation of colonialism in textbooks and educational films. This project takes a novel approach by positioning classroom films and textbooks within the broader context of other educational media and in doing so extending the field of historical education media research. The combination of textbook and film analysis is methodological terra incognita. While of course on the one hand, the comparative, trans-national approach enables international comparisons, on the other it also involves central, trans-national stakeholders who have contributed to the distribution of this new educational medium. By analysing construction methods and perception patterns of colonialism in educational films and in textbooks to question whether there was a distinction between the “academic” and text-oriented mediation of colonialism in textbooks and the “illustrative” presentation style required by educational films, the project positions itself at the interface between historical educational media research, media studies and history. We aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of the different narratives and visualisations of Europe’s colonial hegemony as well as colonial knowledge in educational media. In addition, the project seeks not only to operationalise for historical educational media research new methodological approaches such as the Visual Turn and cultural memory studies, but also to develop them further by focusing on the analysis of “moving images”.

ENDNOTES