

# Media Control in the GDR as Political PR Operation.

## A Case Study on Structures of Public Communication in Socialist Countries

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The present study aims at analysing the practice of media control in East Germany before the wall came down. You may wonder why we came up with this very historical topic on a conference about Public Relations (PR). At first glance, there doesn't seem to be any connection between a former socialist country without independent media system and the modern notion of Public Relations. However, we would like to demonstrate on the example of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) the possible consequences if the mass media is influenced and controlled by politics or lobbyists.

Like in communist Romania, there was no independent media system in the GDR. Political leaders could directly control and steer the media through a sophisticated media control system (Holzweißig 2002, Classen 2007). In the GDR, the basic principle of organisation and leadership was in accordance with the socialist state theory: democratic centralism. This principle was enforced both with the organisational structures of the communist party SED (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*) and with the entire State's system. The Central Committee was the highest element in the structure of the Party in between the Party sessions. The centre of power was in the hands of the Secretariat of the Committee which was headed by a General-Secretary who was also the chairman of the Politbüro (Walter Ulbricht till 1971 and then Erich Honecker). In the political hierarchy the members of the Central Committee stood higher than the Ministers; the Secretary and section leaders of the Central Committee had the authority to issue directives to the State Ministers. The topics and main concerns to be covered by the media reporting were determined at the centre of power. The Central Committee's secretary for agitation and propaganda presided over the Agitation Section which was in charge of organising and steering

the mass media. The tools used to steer the media were daily conferences in Berlin as well as press instructions. Instructions issued by the state-controlled press office of the GDR Government were an additional tool that oversaw the operation of the press of the four smaller parties. Holzweißig (2002) has spoken of, and written about, “a censorship without censors”. He used the term to describe the transmission of instructions about content and form to the newsrooms, via the section for agitation at the Central Committee of the SED and via the press office of the Prime Minister. He described how the Party in power used the management of human resources, the professional training, the national news agency and the Ministry for State Security to make sure that instructions were being followed.

The communist leaders could publish any news to support their interests and they could reject any news they disliked – like in a PR operation. Apart from all the obvious differences between the media landscapes of a communist country in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and modern societies, we can observe similar trends nowadays: Public Relations is becoming increasingly important and going directly to readers and viewers. There are two main trends:

- First, PR messages cover the daily news to a greater extent than ever before. PR agencies even offer news distribution networks (cf. Fortunato 2000). Of course, this is linked to the economic situation, to the lack of good journalists due to financial constraints. Media companies get less advertising and depend more often on PR messages being mostly free of charge. The receiver, however, may not make the connection to the source.
- And secondly, PR messages reach the readers and viewers more often on a direct way (cf. Hendrix & Hayes 2010). Specific websites like [fc.bayern.telekom.de](http://fc.bayern.telekom.de) address potential clients. As a fan of FC Bayern Munich it is not necessary to make use of public media like newspapers or TV programs any more. The website offers all a fan needs: news and interviews, pictures, videos and memorabilia. Such offerings go far beyond common mass communication channels. On the one hand they allow personalized advertising to target the desired audience, and on the other hand they are often linked to social network sites such as Facebook or Twitter that encourage their users to share the information with their friends and acquaintances.

These two trends do not only exist in sports or other leisure time activities, but also in politics and in economics. The question seems to be clear: Is this a problem or not? Is the fading of independent mass media a problem, the fading of the journalist as a gatekeeper? Journalists ideally assume the role of a gatekeeper: they select information according to news value principles (like relevance or timeliness, cf. Shoemaker & Reese 1991, Shoemaker & Cohen 2006), and journalists even evaluate information and investigate a single topic of interest. If these normative functions of journalism become subject to commercial pressures and journalists are less and less able to act as gatekeepers, but rather as PR professionals serving the specific interests of special

groups, financial or political power, it is difficult for the audience to ascertain the facts and to identify the source of information.

The goal of the present study is to demonstrate the consequences of the absence of a free and independent journalism on the example of the GDR. In the first section, we will outline the theoretical background of the study, followed by a short summary of the sources we used. Section 3 will show, with the support of a chain of arguments (organized in six theses), how the steering of the media in the GDR worked and how the audience judged it. The main result: Average citizens as well as professional readers (politicians and business leaders at home and abroad) understood the GDR press as it was meant, namely as a Public Relations operation. As people know about political and economical interests, PR lacks credibility. Communication structures solely based on Public Relations and without an independent journalism may hinder the build up of opinions and of willingness to engage in society.

## **1. Theoretical background**

Our starting point is the concept of political public sphere that is surrounded by three normative claims (cf. Gerhards & Neidhardt 1990):

- A public sphere needs to be open for all groups in society as well as for all issues and opinions that have a collective relevance (role of transparency).
- The actors involved in a public sphere have to handle issues and opinions of others in a discursive manner (validation role).
- This is how public opinions can emerge and be perceived as convincing and accepted by the public at large (role of orientation).

As no autonomous media system emerged in the GDR, on the contrary mass communication remained dependent on the political system, the politically staged public sphere could not deliver these functions, at least not as is the case in democratic public spheres (Mouffe 2000). Western media and underground publications provided only a limited alternative. First of all, quite a large number of GDR citizens had no access to the products of the counter public sphere, neither did they have the possibility to listen to or to watch the radio and television output from the Federal Republic of Germany (some of them because of technical reasons, others because this would have contradicted their convictions), and secondly reporting was limited in every respect, in its scope, in its topics and in its analysis (cf. Meyen & Schwer 2007).

The GDR media could not constitute a public system of debate that provides an intermediary between the political system and the citizens, yet all other dimensions of a media system are also represented there: a professional production of media content that compete for the attention of the public (amongst one another and at least in the field of radio with the broadcast from the West), a public that remains “fundamentally un-excluded”. The fact that public communication “within the horizon of all citizens” was happening (Gerhards & Neidhardt 1990) allowed the leadership of the SED to use the media for political Public Relations.

We define Public Relations here along with Klaus Merten (2008) as the “management of the difference between facts and fiction”. Merten described PR specialists as the “professional builders of fictional realities” who make every effort to represent issues constantly in a positive tone, with the final aim “to manipulate the perception in the public sphere to their own ends”. This definition is pertinent in the “media society” (since Merten holds media contents to be fundamentally fictional, the need for Public Relations emerges to make it possible to transform the image of persons, companies, events or ideas), this definition does at the same time refer to its origin in the first communicative mode, namely propaganda. We need to clarify that the present study deals with political Public Relations and not (as in most research on the GDR) with propaganda. If one follows the theory of totalitarianism, dictatorships cannot be imagined in the twentieth century without propaganda. Hannah Arendt (1958) has described the transformation of the factual into a fictional world, that Merten sees as constitutive for all media, as the main characteristic of totalitarian movements and she has reckoned with the essential role of propaganda first of all in the mobilisation phase. Friedrich and Brzezinski (1965) have focused more on the consequences of media control and postulated that although people do actually pull back from public sphere and mistrust official information, because of the constant barrage of slogans, this type of brainwashing eventually leads them to integrate specific stereotypes, images and values in their own thinking.

First, there is only very shaky (empirical) evidence to support this postulate, secondly, the term propaganda is so negatively loaded that it does pre-empt the result on the actual analysis (one-sidedness, illegitimacy and strong effects) and thirdly, as Classen (2007) convincingly demonstrated, it remains unclear how propaganda can be distinguished from Public Relations, advertising and education: “Where does propaganda begin and where does it end?” The term “political PR” seems therefore to relate to the staged public sphere rather than to the concept of propaganda. Furthermore, propaganda theories ignore the influences from transboundary mass media. The people in charge knew that a large number of GDR citizens had access to Western television and radio programs. Communist leaders have implied that especially West Germany was constantly on the lookout for weaknesses. That’s why the East German communist party had two target groups: the East Germans of course, and, more important, the West – because of boomerang effects. This situation is more similar to a PR problem than to a propaganda campaign.

## **2. Sources**

The present paper is based on three main sources. The first kind of sources and data that served to elaborate the following segments comes from the Federal archives in Berlin. Documents from the section for agitation at the Central Committee of the SED and from the other media relevant sections in the Central Committee of SED covering the period under consideration have all been drawn into the research, namely the

Sections for agitation and propaganda, other parties, youth, culture, economic relations and international relations at the Central Committee of the SED (party-level) as well as the press office and National Front (state-level). These files provide information about the structures that influenced the media as well as about the communication process at play in the background.

As a second source we use quantitative and qualitative content analyses of four main GDR national newspapers (*Neues Deutschland*, *Junge Welt*, *Neue Zeit*, *Der Morgen*): on the one hand a longitudinal study (1950-1989) of the main topics, actors and reference frames and on the other hand case studies on specific historical events (i.e. the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, the Olympic Games of Munich in 1972 with its unique confrontation between athletes from East and West Germany and the challenge of the political PR connected with the terrorist attack against the team of Israel or the explosion of the gas combine *Schwarze Pumpe* in 1982 which had a heavy influence on the whole GDR economy).

The third source are two series of biographical interviews: on the one hand with more than 100 former GDR-residents who have been asked about their everyday media usage during the 1980s (cf. Meyen & Schwer 2007) and on the other hand with 31 leading GDR journalists asked about their working conditions, their role perceptions and the influence of the political leaders on media contents (cf. Meyen & Fiedler 2011).

### 3. Results

The format of the present essay only allows us to include limited archive evidence and results of questionnaires to support the successive stages of the argument. We summarize our results along the following theses:

*Thesis 1: The steering of the media in the GDR was a PR operation. The management of the difference between facts and fiction served the purpose to support the interests of the rulers, in their interaction with the West and in the competition to win the minds of their own citizens. It follows that the specific instructions can only be understood in regard to the internal and international political situation.*

This process can be demonstrated in details in the transmissions of the agitation section, the press office and the party secretaries in charge. Heinz Geggel, who was head of the Agitation Section as of 1973, instructed the chief editors on May 29, 1980 to consider “our collective State and economical interests” as the supreme guideline for reporting and he requested from them not “to put anything into the public domain that would run counter to that interest”.

Guiding principles were set down in concrete instructions on an everyday basis and guided the controllers. On March 19, 1970 the Secretary for Agitation Werner Lamberz instructed the chief editors to cover the meeting between Willy Brandt (chancellor of the FRG) and Willi Stoph (Prime Minister of the GDR) in Erfurt, at which thousands of

GDR citizens had warmly welcomed the West German Chancellor. Lamberz told them to dedicate “extra care and attention to the expression of support of the GDR population for our politics and Government as well as to the claims put to the Government of the FRG”. When the mouthpiece of the East-German Trade Union “Tribüne” reported about unemployment in Austria, chairman Harry Tisch was consulted. The article dealt with facts but their publicising was “not politically correct” in the immediate follow up to the visit by the Federal President of Austria (cf. Meyen & Fiedler 2010).

Up to now research has only described in a piecemeal manner the “fiction” that was delivered to the homes of GDR citizens in the daily press. Nevertheless, a quantitative analysis of the mouthpieces Neues Deutschland, Junge Welt, Neue Zeit and Der Morgen for the years between 1950 and 1989 has demonstrated that the political and economic situation, and consequently the need to legitimize, that the SED leadership had to deal with, influenced the usage of slogans and a rhetoric of achievements as well as the choice of topics and the image of the West that was depicted in the papers (cf. Fiedler 2011). As is to be expected when a PR operation steers the newsrooms, reports over the politics of the socialist camp dominate overwhelmingly the output of the four papers over the entire period under consideration, nearly all reporting about the West is negative whereas the East is shown under a positive light. Furthermore, the representation of capitalist and socialist countries in the GDR media depended on the international political context. Capitalist countries were described extremely hostile in the 1960s when the GDR was still internationally isolated, also due to the construction of the Wall in 1961. The press coverage of events in the Western world became friendlier in the 1970s when the GDR gained international recognition, in particular in the aftermath of the accession to the United Nations in 1973. In the 1980s the country depended largely on imports and financial backup from the Western countries, so the media even reported in a very friendly manner about the capitalist world, whereas socialist countries were represented in a more hostile way, especially by the end of the 1980s when the socialist block fell apart and the GDR dissociated from Poland’s Solidarnosc-movement and Gorbachev’s Glasnost and Perestroika (Fig. 1).

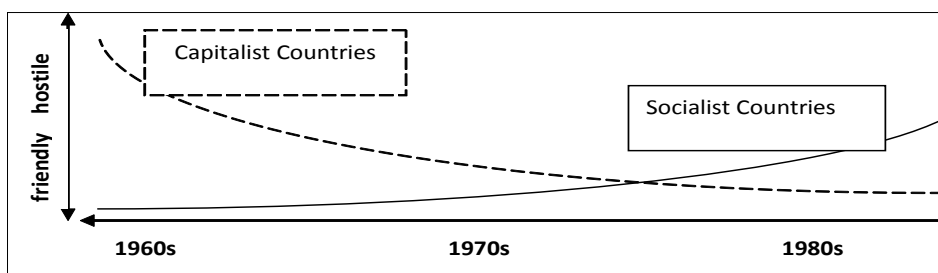


Fig. 1: The representation of capitalist and socialist countries in the GDR media

*Thesis 2: The people in charge have consistently implied that “the other side” (in particular the Federal Republic of Germany) was on the lookout for weaknesses of the GDR in all its publications and they made every effort to suppress the reporting of any internal details that their adversary might have used for their own interest.*

This thesis can be explained on the example of the explosion of the most important gas state combine in the GDR in 1982, the so called *Schwarze Pumpe* (black pump). It was considered to be one of the worst catastrophes in the history of the GDR, because most of the households and industry depended on gas coming from this state combine. The explosion largely affected the economy – more imports from the Western world were necessary, many factories of the state industry could not work for several weeks. However, after the explosion, the media only provided the very necessary information, such as: When will the *Schwarze Pumpe* start operations again? How many people were injured? All negative information was systematically suppressed – in public many questions remained unanswered: What does the explosion mean for the GDR economy on the whole? How many households are out of gas and for how long (cf. Vogel 2011)?

The argumentation could get even trickier when it had to do with the essential, foreign currency-related matter of external trade. In 1983 the East-German news agency announced an export contract for bullet-chargers with France. Günter Mittag, in charge of economy within the Central Committee, asked Erich Honecker to give up “the publication of such news in the future”. “The reactionary spheres” would try at any cost to prevent exports from the GDR and would take advantage of such news to influence the political conditions so that the GDR could be dismissed as a supplier (for reasons of competition). Since it was not possible to keep silent about relations to non socialist countries, Mittag suggested that it was possible to publish information about “participation in fairs and exhibitions” or “trips of delegations and personalities” but in “no case any concrete buyers or other facts” (cf. Meyen & Fiedler 2010).

*Thesis 3: Since the political Public Relations operation had to support the interests of the rulers, it was directly attached to the centre of power. The agitation secretaries and the leaders of the SED, Walter Ulbricht and Erich Honecker, personally decided even the details of media steering.*

Gunter Holzweißig (1999, 591) spoke about “General-Editors in Chief” and wondered at the fact that General-Secretary Erich Honecker took the time to draft “announcements, commentaries and articles” for the leading media by himself. First, this does not seem so surprising for someone who conceives the steering and control of the media as a political PR tool and secondly, the files show that this was not the end of it. Even trivialities such as the ten line announcement about the bullet-charger contract in 1983 were drafted by Honecker himself.

It was a matter of handling isolated sentences and specific formulations, as for instance in the case of an announcement about a negotiation in the US Ministry for

Agriculture on November 11, 1976 (just about 20 lines) in which Honecker supported a proposal of Agitation Secretary Lamberz, to rewrite the beginning and the first two descriptive sentences to make sure that the GDR “would not appear to be in a position of pleading”. The Agitation Secretaries kept Erich Honecker permanently informed of the foreign reactions to the news published in the GDR. The top of the *SED* hierarchy exploited the GDR media environment to the fullest extent in particular for its foreign relations.

*Thesis 4: The most important stake holders of the political Public Relation operation (politicians, ambassadors, businessmen and artists, who had to deal with the GDR) used to read the East German press as it was conceived (namely as an official statement of the SED and they tried to draw conclusions about the position and the objectives of the GDR leadership.*

Herbert Okun, US Ambassador to the GDR from 1980 to 1983, told Joachim Herrmann, Agitation Secretary, in a private interview in January 1981, that he started his day “with the study of the *Neues Deutschland* (the mouthpiece of the *SED*) because this was “the first competent information about the politics of the GDR.” Similar statements can be found mainly in the files that cover the activities of the Permanent Representative of the GFR in the GDR. Klaus Bölling (1981-1982) for instance, asked Lothar Kolditz, the President of the national council of the National Front of the GDR, if it had anything to do with the events in Poland that the GDR newspapers currently insisted so heavily on order, cleanliness and security.

But not only public officials shared this opinion. In the biographical interviews people said that they read *Neues Deutschland* because that was where the *SED* opinion stood and where they could find out how specific things were interpreted by officialdom. Readers spoke of “reading between the lines” and “in between the spaces”. Since the *SED* mouthpiece had copy deadline at about the same time as the West German Television news bulletin “Tagesschau”, GDR citizens could find out on the next morning how the *SED* dealt with the news that the West Germans had broadcast (cf. Meyen & Schwer 2007).

*Thesis 5: Rather than reflecting public opinion, the GDR leaders constantly attempted to create a climate of opinion in the mass media conducive to their own purposes and preferences.*

This happened with the help of GDR citizens supporting publicly the *SED* politics in the media and can be explained on the example of the 6-day-war in 1967, when Israel occupied the Westbank, the Gaza strip and the Sinai Peninsula. We have to remember the political and historical context of the 1960s: On the one hand, the GDR was isolated and only recognized by socialist countries. On the other, the GDR tried to build up diplomatic relations with the Arab world (in order to break the international isolation). For this reason, after the war, the GDR strongly condemned the Israeli so-called “aggression” against the Arab states. The GDR media quoted GDR citizens



and even Jewish people who was publicly solidary with the Arab world. However, internal reports of the Central Committee showed that especially among the Jewish population in the GDR there were strong objections against the Arab countries. Yet, these voices were kept in secret in support of the Arab countries (cf. Osterer 2011).

*Thesis 6: Although Western media and everyday life experiences could provide a counterbalance to the GDR media, internal details of the Central Committee remained secret. The biased climate of opinion as well as the policy of non-information and misinformation left GDR citizens and the Western world short of hard facts, data and reliable insights into their own situation and that of others.*

Here, once again, we can use the example of the *Schwarze Pumpe*. People were not informed about the dimension of the catastrophe. Although the Central Committee had very detailed reports on the situation and could make clear economic predictions, none of these details were ever reported by the media and were only revealed after the fall of the wall in 1989. In this particular case, neither the West-German television nor personal experiences could replace the lack of a free media in the GDR. People could just make a guess what really happened in the *Schwarze Pumpe*.

#### **4. Conclusion**

One can summarize that PR lacks credibility in general as people know about political and economical interests of lobbyist groups. This was not just the case in the GDR, but also in our time people mistrust PR messages. However, only independent journalism can provide us with internal insights on a specific issue and reveal these political and economical interests (which the media's commitment to transparency). As long as the legal framework guarantees "access to information"-principles (which was not the case in the GDR), journalists can hold governments and businessmen accountable for their actions. At the same time, citizens can make a well-informed choice.

Furthermore, only independent media can reflect the actual climate of opinion as a result of public discourse. This shows us what others think about a certain topic. We need this information for orientation in our daily life and validation of our personal anticipations. For this reason, both sides (PR professionals *and* citizens) need an independent journalism that is key to bring a culture of innovation into society. PR communication structures may hinder the build up of opinions and of willingness to engage in a long term and in that sense may retard the process of change in society – as we have learned from the example of the GDR.

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