

The steering of the press in the socialist states of Eastern Europe: the German Democratic Republic (GDR) as a case study

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The present essay will examine the practice of media steering in the GDR to demonstrate how newspapers were used as tools of political public relations. In the struggle to achieve recognition from the population and the outside world, the GDR regime suppressed any information that might prove harmful to its own interests. This theoretical approach and the results of the present study contradict previous research that largely draws on theories about propaganda and totalitarianism, and conclude that the press in the GDR was monotonous, uniform and lacking in informational content.

Introduction

The role of the press in the countries of socialist Eastern Europe remains relatively unknown. Media experts have usually dedicated more attention to the electronic media, not only because they could overcome the Iron Curtain in both directions,¹ but

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¹ See 'Radio Wars: Broadcasting during the Cold War', Special Issue: *Cold War History* 13, no. 2 (2013): 145–275; A. Ross Johnson and R. Eugene Parta, eds., *Cold War Broadcasting: Impact on the Soviet Union*

probably also because radio and television broadcasts, as the emerging mass media of the twentieth century, relegated the printed word to a bygone era. The present study deals with the printed press in the GDR and thus provides a contribution to the as yet unwritten history of the press in socialist Eastern Europe. At the same time it suggests a theoretical change of paradigm in the research of the role of the media in the socialist countries. The underlying assumption is that media steering in the GDR (and presumably in other socialist states of Eastern Europe) can best be described as ‘political public relations’ defined as ‘the management of the difference between fact and artefact’² that aims at supporting the current political interests of the rulers, both in their contest with the West and their struggle for recognition amongst the population. Which information arrived at which media outlet was decided by the higher levels of the ruling hierarchy, including the Secretary General himself.³ It is therefore our main assumption that political developments on the global scene influenced media policy and had reverberations in the printed press.

The case of the GDR is particularly interesting for various reasons. Against the backdrop of the politically, socially and ideologically divided German nation, the communist state constantly had to compete against its economically more successful Western counterpart, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), for the hearts and minds of the (East) German population.⁴ This continuous struggle shaped national policies and eventually resulted in the construction of the Wall in 1961, designed to cut off the outflow of East German refugees. Compared to other socialist and communist countries, the GDR was therefore in a very unique situation (with the exception of the Korean peninsula). The Iron Curtain could stop the ‘brain drain’ and population shrinkage, but it couldn’t change the fact that the two German nations shared the same language, culture, history, and in many cases had families living on both sides of the division. This helps explain why the communist elite in the GDR kept a tight grip over unpleasant news that could play into the hands of the ‘class enemy’. Rulers in East

Footnote 1 continued

and Eastern Europe. *A Collection of Studies and Documents* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010); Michael Meyen and Ute Nawratil, ‘The Viewers: Television and Everyday Life in East Germany’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 24, no. 3 (2004): 355–64; Claudia Dittmar, ‘GDR Television in Competition with West German Programming’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 24, no. 3 (2004): 327–43; James Schwoch, ‘Cold War Telecommunications Strategy and the Question of German Television’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 21, no. 2 (2001): 109–21.

² Klaus Merten, ‘Progress in Public Relations by Improving Controlling and Measurement’, paper presented to the 12th International Public Relations Research Symposium Public Relations Metrics: Evaluation and Measurement, 1–3 July 2005, Lake Bled, Slovenia, http://www.bledcom.si/_files/330/klaus_merten.pdf, [accessed 6 March 2014]; Idem, ‘Zur Definition von Public Relations’, *Medien und Kommunikationswissenschaft* 56, no. 1 (2008): 42–59.

³ Anke Fiedler, *Medienlenkung in der DDR* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2014).

⁴ Michael Meyen and Anke Fiedler, ‘Totalitäre Vernichtung der politischen Öffentlichkeit? Tageszeitungen und Kommunikationsstrukturen in der DDR’, in *Wie im Westen, nur anders. Medien in der DDR*, ed. Stefan Zahlmann (Berlin: Panama, 2010), 35–59.

Berlin constantly feared that the Western electronic media could make use of negative news in their reporting against the GDR.

Unlike radio and television, newspapers rarely passed from one side to another. Due to strict controls in the GDR, Western newspapers and magazines were officially only accessible for a very special circle of people (mainly high-ranking officials of the communist party). East German newspapers, meanwhile, barely attracted a West German readership, except for politicians, diplomats or academics who were interested in GDR politics.

Consequently, West Germany's negative stereotypes about the GDR's newspapers were formed long before barbed wires and concrete walls divided the European continent into two blocs. Western observers suggested that the East German press was designed to manipulate and to misinform and, by its very nature, was monotonous to read and lacked information.⁵ It did not take long to identify a scape goat for the 'dullness' of the press environment: on the basis of Lenin's theory of the press, the GDR's newspapers could not be anything but 'collective propagandists', 'collective agitators' and 'collective organisers'.⁶ The purpose of the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) was to create 'an integrated, monopolized and monosemous public culture' and, for this reason, the media system had to ensure 'a centralized organisation for the dissemination of news from centres in Berlin to regional peripheries'.⁷ Uniformity across the board was deemed to be the necessary consequence. In spite of the fact that Lenin's triad is hardly adequate to describe (much less to explain) the process of media steering in the GDR, the triple formula of 'propagandist', 'agitator' and 'organiser', along with the theories on propaganda and totalitarianism, are still the most frequently quoted in the literature.⁸ The *Neues Deutschland*, for example, mouthpiece of the SED and the leading outlet for the rest of the media environment was, according to Boyer, 'indeed organised explicitly according to Lenin's model and served as the crucible for the calibration and dissemination of the "party line" on any matter of social import'.⁹ Why then should 'the faded newspapers and disturbing memories'¹⁰ of the GDR be retrieved out of oblivion if they are all supposed to have been identical?

⁵ Gunter Holzweißig, *Massenmedien in der DDR* (Berlin: Holzapfel, 1983), 15, 21; Gunter Holzweißig, *Zensur ohne Zensor. Die SED-Informationsdiktatur* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1997).

⁶ Elisabeth M. Herrmann, 'Grundzüge der marxistisch-leninistischen Presstheorie. Funktionsbestimmung der Presse in der marxistisch-leninistischen Ideologie', *Publizistik* 5 (1960): 225–42.

⁷ Dominic Boyer, *Spirit and System: Media, Intellectuals, and the Dialectic in Modern German Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 128.

⁸ Jürgen Wilke, 'Medien DDR', in *Fischer Lexikon Publizistik Massenkommunikation*, ed. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2009), 235–63; Klaus Arnold, 'Propaganda als ideologische Kommunikation', *Publizistik* 48 (2003): 63–82; Maryellen Boyle, *Capturing Journalism: Press and Politics in East Germany, 1945–1991* (San Diego: University of California, 1992).

⁹ Boyer, *Spirit and System*, 122–3.

¹⁰ Konrad H. Jarausch, 'Beyond Uniformity: The Challenge of Historicizing the GDR', in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad H. Jarausch (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 3–14.

The literature provides an answer to this question: the printed press in the GDR has not been extensively analysed and numerous gaps remain in the research bibliography. Content analysis of East German newspapers is usually limited to specific events such as the shooting down of a South Korean airliner in the summer of 1983.¹¹ Alternatively researchers focus on the handling of topics at the centre of attention of the press, for example, foreign policy between East and West Germany.¹² These few limited studies do not provide sufficient data to support the widespread assumption that the GDR's press outlets, over the years, remained entirely uniform and monotonous. Former journalists of the GDR can still recall distinct phases in which they benefitted from a measure of freedom while newspaper readers have memories of differences between the various newspapers available on the market.¹³

This point is underscored by the fact that the GDR had 39 dailies, amongst which *Neues Deutschland* and *Junge Welt*, the mouthpiece of Free German Youth (FDJ) had a circulation of more than one million respectively. In the 1980s newspaper circulation amounted to one and a half per household on average, a rate surpassed only by Japan.¹⁴ It is easy to object that all newspapers were owned by political parties or by so-called mass organisations and were therefore licensed editions but in reality the number of papers never managed to match demand, given shortages in paper supply and insufficient printing facilities, which were constant problems in the GDR.¹⁵

Two types of documents facilitate research into the printed press of the GDR: first, newspaper content and second, instructions given to the press and forwarded to the media by the Agitation Division of the Central Committee of the SED and by the governmental Press Office at the Council of Ministers and kept at the Federal Archives in Berlin. The present study is based on a quantitative content analysis of 17,920 articles from the GDR major papers *Neues Deutschland*, *Junge Welt*, *Neue Zeit* and *Der Morgen* and 6,454 instructions to the press.

The approach adopted for the research design, the selection of material and data analysis will be explained in the fourth part of the present article. First, however, it is necessary, to justify in section two why the steering of the media in the GDR is described as an operation of 'political public relations' according to the definition of Merten.¹⁶ The subsequent part will provide an outline of the overall changes that took place during the forty years of the GDR. Alongside the theoretical approach and the

¹¹ Wilfried Scharf, 'Zur Berichterstattung des Neuen Deutschland über den Abschluß einer südkoreanischen Passagiermaschine im Sommer 1983', *Publizistik* 29 (1984): 492–502.

¹² Wilfried Scharf, *Das Bild der Bundesrepublik in den Massenmedien der DDR. Eine empirische Untersuchung von Tageszeitungen, Hörfunk und Fernsehen* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1985).

¹³ Michael Meyen and Anke Fiedler, 'Journalists in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). A collective biography', *Journalism Studies* 14, no. 3 (2013): 321–35; Michael Meyen, *Denver Clan und Neues Deutschland. Mediennutzung in der DDR* (Berlin: Christoph Links, 2003).

¹⁴ Frank Bösch, *Mediengeschichte* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2011), 197.

¹⁵ Konrad Dussel, *Deutsche Tagespresse im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Münster: Lit, 2011), 201.

¹⁶ Merten, 'Progress in Public Relations'; Merten, 'Zur Definition von Public Relations'.

historical contextualisation, section five will then provide a thematic presentation of the results of the content analysis.

Theoretical background: the steering of the press as a political PR operation

The GDR rulers may have enjoyed listening to crowds chanting: ‘The Party is always right’, the “anthem” of the SED, but they could not flaunt their power as princes did in feudal times. In the absence of a democratic electoral process, GDR rulers had to seek a measure of legitimacy via public communication and needed to justify the split of the German nation into two and the GDR’s poor economic achievements in comparison to the West.¹⁷ According to Classen, the GDR ruling elite ‘left no doubt that the modern mass media [...] were to them first and foremost instruments for implementing their political objectives.’¹⁸ The emphasis is on ‘political objectives’ and these are subject to changes. The GDR, or the notorious “Soviet Zone” born in the aftermath of WWII, acceded to the United Nations Organisation in 1973 and established diplomatic relations with numerous countries of the Western world. The political conditions were no longer that of a decade earlier and neither were the interests of the GDR rulers. One can therefore postulate here that political guidance and control of the press, and consequently the lead articles in the newspapers, changed over the decades.

The present paper contrasts with studies that focus exclusively on concepts of propaganda and totalitarianism. Such studies tend to view media politics under the overall suspicion of ideological orthodoxy of the communist regimes without consideration for the structural changes that took place in the media environment and without factual knowledge about media content. Holzweißig alleges that the dogmatic views of Lenin remained ‘sacrosanct’ right to the end of the GDR. The programmes and decisions of the SED ‘were the norm for every journalist ever since its inception in 1946.’¹⁹ The same goes for Randall Bytwerk, who conducted an analysis of public communication in the GDR using the theory of propaganda of the French sociologist Jacques Ellul, and was of the opinion that ‘the fundamental strategies remained rather constant.’²⁰ In one of her major works Hannah Arendt has described the transformation of the factual into a fictional world as the main characteristic of totalitarian movements and she has reckoned with the essential role of propaganda first of all in the mobilisation phase.²¹ Friedrich and Brzezinski have focused more on

¹⁷ Thomas Lindenberger, ‘Tacit Minimal Consensus: The Always Precarious East German Dictatorship’, in *Popular Opinion in Totalitarian Regimes: Fascism, Nazism, Communism*, ed. Paul Corner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 208–222.

¹⁸ Christoph Classen, ‘Captive audience? GDR Radio in the Mirror of Listeners’ Mail’, *Cold War History*, 13, no. 2 (2013): 239–54.

¹⁹ Holzweißig, *Zensur ohne Zensor*, 9–11.

²⁰ Randall L. Bytwerk, ‘The Failure of the Propaganda of the German Democratic Republic’, *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 85 (1999): 400–16.

²¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Meridian, 1958).

the consequences of media control and postulated that although people pull back from the public sphere and mistrust official information amid a constant barrage of slogans; this type of brainwashing eventually leads them to absorb specific stereotypes, images and values into their own thinking.²²

First, there is only very shaky (empirical) evidence to support these postulates. Second, the term propaganda is so negatively loaded that it pre-empts the result of the actual analysis (one-sidedness, illegitimacy and strong effects)²³; and third, as Classen convincingly demonstrates, it remains unclear how propaganda can be distinguished from public relations, advertising and education: 'Where does propaganda begin and where does it end?'²⁴ Taking it from there the present paper proposes to use the expression 'political public relations' to describe the media in the GDR.

Merten has defined public relations as the 'management of difference of communication by communication'²⁵ and described professional PR people as 'professional builders of fictional realities' who attempt to represent 'facts in a positive light' and to minimise or cover up negative ones, aiming 'to manipulate the perceptions of the public at large to their own interests' as well as to generate 'more positive constructs of reality.'²⁶ Since the GDR leadership considered the media to be an instrument in the class struggle, it seems that the PR concept is more adequate to describe the 'politically staged public sphere' in the GDR than the overall idea of propaganda. The SED endeavoured to set up artefacts in the segment of public life that it could control, namely the media output, in order to serve its own interests, while at the same time being aware that more than 80% of the public in the GDR could pick up the broadcast of Western television and radio channels. It follows naturally that the instructions transmitted to the media by the Central Committee and by the governmental Press Office worked as press releases do today (albeit with an obligation to print or to broadcast). The leadership launched the instructions in order to promote a positive image of the GDR inside the country as well as abroad. Given that the communist ideology was a permanent backdrop in East Germany, the 'facts' presented in the media did not necessarily correspond with the objective truth, but rather with the reproduction of so-called realities.²⁷ Ideology served the purpose of highlighting, organising, selecting and eventually processing events into a fiction. One could say that the 'making of a difference between facts and artefacts' actually meant making a difference between a construction of reality (unintentionally) and a construction of a construction of reality (intentionally).

²² Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965).

²³ Arnold, 'Propaganda als ideologische Kommunikation'.

²⁴ Christoph Classen, 'Thoughts on the Significance of Mass-Media Communications in the Third Reich and the GDR,' *Totalitarian Movements and Political Regimes* 8 (2007): 547–62.

²⁵ Merten, 'Progress in Public Relations', 14.

²⁶ Merten, 'Zur Definition von Public Relations', 55.

²⁷ Merten, 'Progress in Public Relations', 8.

Merten distinguishes between three modes of 'difference-management'. First, 'difference in the objective dimension', meaning that the 'PR managers put their press releases into words other than journalists would do' (contingently in one way or another). Second, 'difference in the temporal dimension' meaning that 'PR managers formulate in a different way with regard to time' (in the sense of setting events in 'the right time frame'); and third, 'difference in the social dimension', meaning that 'PR managers formulate their messages according to different target groups with whom they want to get in touch.'²⁸ The natural outcome of this definition is that the media steering in the GDR was dependent on its source and therefore contingent to specific contexts and that it varied over time (including 'the chance to prevent a publication concerning a certain topic'²⁹). Media steering may thus have led to presenting the interests of the SED from different angles for specific classes of society.

Media steering against the backdrop of historical context

If contingent interests are supposed to have influenced the steering of the media in the GDR, one needs to start by looking at the political context that determined the political interests. Against the backdrop of the causal chain: 'political context > interests of the SED > steering of the media as difference management in factual, temporal and social dimensions > reporting of the press', one can subdivide the interests of the GDR leaders in four phases. The creation of the GDR state on 7 October 1949 introduced the first phase that was mainly aimed at integration with the Eastern bloc. In the aftermath of WWII the foremost objective of the GDR was to regain the trust of people in the communist brother nations. As early as September 1950 the GDR gained membership of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON). The unilateral declaration of March 1954 in which the USSR declared that it would take up formal relations with the GDR 'as with other sovereign states' was a further status upgrade. In May 1955 eight socialist states, including the GDR, signed the 'Warsaw Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance' whereas it remained largely isolated from the international scene.³⁰ At the same time, the GDR leadership had been coming under a lot of pressure because of the threat posed by the increasing flow of refugees from Eastern to Western Germany. All efforts were geared towards conveying the socialist ideal and dissociating from the West.

After the Berlin Wall had been built (phase 2), the economic and political system of the GDR could consolidate its position, not only because the flow of people towards Western Germany came to an end but also because the West had to take the GDR seriously all of a sudden. It was then possible to work towards the build-up of socialism behind the Iron Curtain without further external disruptions. The building

²⁸ Ibid., 14.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Helga Haftendorn, *Coming of Age: German Foreign Policy since 1945* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 127.

of the Wall had caused the GDR a serious loss of credit on the international scene (at least in the Western world) and it started looking for political support and economic cooperation with the states that were not affiliated to either of the Eastern or Western blocs. The GDR tried to gain diplomatic recognition in particular from the new national states in Africa and Asia and it succeeded to a certain extent.³¹ This second phase ended with the dismissal of the First Secretary of the SED, Walter Ulbricht and the appointment of Erich Honecker to replace him in 1971.

The third phase heralded an international breakthrough when the government of the Federal Republic of Germany signed the Basic Treaty with the GDR in December 1972 with a view to regulating relations between both German states, leading to the constitutional recognition of the GDR by the FRG and other Western states. In September 1973 both German states entered the United Nations Organisation; in August 1975 the GDR signed the Helsinki Final Acts of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. In the course of this third phase the SED was pursuing three fundamental objectives: first to build up a network of diplomatic and economic relations across the world, second to uphold the ideological dissociation from the West and, as a consequence, thirdly to maintain its declared belief in the USSR and in socialism.

The last phase did not signal the occurrence of any specific event, it was merely the consequence of the latent decline of the socialist camp in Eastern Europe, starting with the upheaval in Poland in 1981, the increasing indebtedness of the GDR and the extensive borrowing from the FRG in 1983 and 1984, the election of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985 up to the street protests in 1989 and eventually the fall of the Wall on 9 November.³² During that last phase the GDR had to seek financial support and import consumer goods from the capitalist world in order to ease economic stagnation. At the same time the leadership of the SED was attempting to suppress the voices of opponents and critics in the Eastern bloc.

Research design: sources, selection criteria and quantitative analyses

To what extent did then the evolution of the international political context and the correlative interests of the SED leadership influence the steering of the media? In order to find answers to this research assignment it was necessary to start with a quantitative analysis of the content of the written (and records of oral) instructions issued between 1960 and 1989. Various units of the Central Committee of the SED as well as ministries and mass organisations generated these instructions and forwarded them to the Agitation Division of the Central Committee where they were centrally collected and then dispatched to the media outlets, either in written form by the way of telegrams or discussed orally in the course of so-called weekly sessions of argumentation.³³ The

³¹ Ulrich van der Heyden, *GDR International Development Policy Involvement. Doctrine and Strategies between Illusions and Reality 1960–1990. The Example of (South) Africa* (Münster: Lit, 2013), 36–41.

³² Haftendorn, *Coming of Age*.

³³ Fiedler, *Medienlenkung in der DDR*, 99–104.

purpose of these argumentations were threefold: first 'to articulate the party line for the upcoming weeks', second 'to circulate a list of tabooed themes and words, which were not to be published in the GDR media', and third 'to mete out specific criticism or praise for individual organisations that had or had not fulfilled the expectations of the party's elite over the past week.'³⁴

The use of the transmitted instructions was based on a codebook organised according to formal categories (type of transmission, unit/office, year) and to type of content (topic, location, specific statement). The unit of codification for telegrams or for hectograph copies of instructions was laid down for every individual item and was thus numerically or topically distinct from the preceding and from the following instruction. The agenda for the meetings of editors in chief at the Central Committee referred to this code to record the oral debates relevant to every change of topic.

The present analysis included a complete survey of all the elements of debate recorded and kept at the Federal Archives in Berlin since 1960. According to the dates of the instructions and to their chronological numbers, it appears that the records kept were practically complete, in particular for the years 1963 to 1968. The analysis also examined the handwritten notes of the chief of the Press Office Kurt Blecha from the 1970s as well as the notes taken by the editors of the *Neues Deutschland* newspaper during the debate sessions between 1980 and 1985. The records of these editors, together with the personal notes of the deputy chief of the Press Office of the National Front, cover the 1980s.³⁵ The nature of these personal notes is of course somewhat problematic because they do not necessarily cover all issues and are tainted by a measure of subjectivity. Yet these records are (to this day) the only available source of information documenting these oral meetings and they remain therefore irreplaceable for the researcher.

A total of 6,454 written or oral instructions to the press are on record. They cover evenly the era of the First Secretary Walter Ulbricht (recorded for the present purpose from January 1960 to April 1971) and that of his successor, Erich Honecker (May 1971 to October 1989). It appears that the mode of transmission of the instructions underwent a radical transformation as of the 1970s when the forwarding of written instructions was gradually replaced by oral recommendations. In keeping with Merten's definition of a 'timely PR operation' one can suppose that the time factor may have played a decisive role for the switch from one approach to the next. The efficiency of the 'management of difference' is dependent on the timeliness of the political PR operation. As of the 1980s, the archives do not contain any more copies of telegrams.

In order to find out how the instructions were implemented by the newspapers and to what extent their reporting was modified according to the internal and external political situation, a second phase of research analysed quantitatively the content of

³⁴ Boyer, *Spirit and System*, 133.

³⁵ Ulrich Bürger, *Das sagen wir natürlich so nicht! Donnerstag-Argus bei Herrn Geggel* (Berlin: Dietz, 1990).

four daily newspapers, namely *Neues Deutschland*, *Junge Welt*, *Neue Zeit* and *Der Morgen*. These papers were selected on the basis of two criteria: relevance and diversity.

The mouthpiece of the SED *Neues Deutschland* and the daily newspaper of the Free German Youth, *Junge Welt* had the largest daily circulation up to the end of the 1980s when they sold over one million copies each. The *Neues Deutschland* was at the forefront of the media environment. As such the paper was immediately subjected to the influence of the party's leadership, right up to the First Secretary of the SED who himself wrote editorials and articles. The readers, both amongst the national population and abroad, were of course aware of this dimension and read the paper as it was conceived, namely as the mouthpiece of the SED leadership. Politicians, ambassadors and international media outlets interpreted the content of the paper as official statements of the SED and attempted to draw conclusions about the position and aims of the leadership.³⁶

The *Junge Welt* as the mouthpiece of the Free German Youth targeted first and foremost the members of the mass organisation and the younger people in the GDR rather than the international audience. It was therefore perceived to be less constrained and became popular even with older generations.³⁷ The Free German Youth was the only recognised youth movement in the GDR and its membership amounted to 2.3 million at the end of the 1980s. As the 'reserve troops of the party' and according to their statutes, they had to familiarise the upcoming generations with the values and the ideals of socialism.³⁸

However, the circulations of the daily *Neue Zeit*, the mouthpiece of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), and *Der Morgen*, the mouthpiece of the Liberal Democratic Party of Germany (LDPD), both remained at a low level of between 50,000 to 100,000 copies. The GDR was officially a multi-party system but the smaller parties, such as the CDU and the LDPD had to acknowledge the leadership of the SED without reservations. Their role vis-à-vis their formal SED ally was to coax specific segments of the population into socialism, especially those which would otherwise have remained outside the reach of the SED. The fact that the smaller parties only had a shadowy existence in the political landscape was clearly visible in the media environment. Their newspapers not only had access to a limited quota of printing paper but they also faced an earlier copy deadline.³⁹ Yet for many citizens the newspapers of the minor factional parties represented the only alternative to the SED newspapers and, in that sense, they are relevant to the present research. Holding a subscription to a newspaper conferred a distinctive status. People who tended to keep their distance from the ruling regime made a point of not receiving SED newspapers in their mailbox.⁴⁰ This was the case for

³⁶ Fiedler, *Medienlenkung in der DDR*, 104–9.

³⁷ Meyen, *Denver Clan und Neues Deutschland*, 118–9.

³⁸ Arne Kapitza, *Transformation der ostdeutschen Presse. 'Berliner Zeitung', 'Junge Welt' und 'Sonntag/Freitag' im Prozeß der deutschen Vereinigung* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1997), 74.

³⁹ Friedhelm Tiemeyer, 'Eine Spur ausführlicher. Ein Vergleich zwischen der SED-Pressen und den Zeitungen der Blockparteien,' *medium 2* (1986): 25–6.

⁴⁰ Meyen, *Denver Clan und Neues Deutschland*, 120–1.

Christian and conservative middle class circles who gravitated around the CDU that was the largest of the smaller parties with 140,000 members during the 1980s. The members of the LDPD and the readers of its paper were mostly manual workers, academics, intellectuals and artists as well as traders. It goes without saying that no one would pretend now that the *Neue Zeit* or *Der Morgen* stood in opposition to the party papers, *Neues Deutschland* or *Junge Welt* but, on the other hand, there is no reason to believe that the target audience of the smaller newspapers had no influence on their content.

The data examined to analyse the four newspapers is contained in the codebook that covers six domains or categories, namely: 'form and layout', 'protagonists', 'main topic', 'headline' (socialist slogans, catchphrases, teasers), 'addressing the readers' (emotions, bonding) and 'specific statements' (negative/positive statements about the non-socialist foreign countries, negative statements about the GDR/the socialist countries, politicisation). Every single issue of the daily newspapers was completely codified, with the exception of sections such as the weather forecast, lottery results and sports scores, as well as classified advertisements, crosswords and riddles. With a view to save time in the present research, reports about sports competitions were only examined according to formal criteria as only minor modifications of content were expected.

The historical span of the present research extends from 1950 (one year after the creation of the GDR state) up to 18 October 1989, which marked the end of the media steering. Nine sample years were selected within the outlined political phases with approximate intervals of five years:

- Edification of the state and integration with the Eastern bloc: 1950, 1955 and 1960;
- Internal political stabilisation: 1965 and 1969;
- International recognition: 1975 and 1980;
- Crisis in the Eastern bloc: 1985 and 1989.

Within each selected year the newspapers issues were analysed for an arbitrary selection of weeks: (first week: Sunday/Monday, second week: Tuesday, third week: Wednesday, fourth week: Thursday, fifth week: Friday and sixth week: Saturday). The justification for the selection of a sample timespan in the spring season was that there would be no reports about crops, no 'silly season' and no major events expected. The present analysis encompassed 212 complete issues of *Neues Deutschland*, *Junge Welt*, *Neue Zeit* and *Der Morgen* representing 17,920 codified reports.

Results

First Thesis

As postulated in the introduction, the results of the content analysis confirm the assumption that the steering of the media in the GDR evolved over the years and, as a

result, so did the news reporting. Since the newspapers had to support the current interests of the party and the state's ruling elite, they hold a mirror to the internal and external issues the country was facing.

The fact that the global political situation influenced the 'management of difference' is exemplified, for instance, by the localisation of the instructions to the press (Table 1). Whilst the instructions during the Ulbricht years predominantly dealt with issues related to the GDR and to the FRG (sample word: dissociation after the construction of the Wall), the steered media reporting in the Honecker years focused on other regions, such as Western Europe or Poland (with the backdrop of the crisis that emerged in the early 1980s). The newly emerging national states, such as the former colonies in Africa and in Asia appeared more regularly in the instructions to the press than they used to in the previous era under Walter Ulbricht. It seems that the SED leadership felt a need to reinforce its control and to avoid jeopardising its external relations at a time when the GDR needed to elicit confidence and to build up international recognition. This can be deduced from the major trend of the instructions to the media: Whilst in the Ulbricht era over 30% of the telegrams contained at least one negative comment about the non-socialist countries (the majority targeting the FRG) this percentage dropped to around 8% in the Honecker years. 'Don't bite the hand that feeds you,' goes a popular German saying. The increasing dependence on imports from the West meant that the critique of capitalism had to be hushed up.

By putting significant bilateral events of the history of the two German states in perspective with other issues of foreign politics it becomes obvious how important the FRG had become to Walter Ulbricht in the 1960s. Not even the visit of President Nikita

Table 1 Localisation Of The Instructions To The Press (Figures In %).

	Era Ulbricht n = 3371	Era Honecker n = 3083
GDR	49.6	60.4
USSR	2.3	4.3
ČSSR	0.4	0.5
Poland	0.4	2.3
Other socialist states	3.4	4.4
FRG	30.2	4.3
Other Western European states	2.6	4.7
USA	1.6	1.8
Other non-socialist states	0.4	0.3
Arab states	1.8	2.5
Other states in Asia	0.4	0.6
Other states in Africa	0.5	1.1
Other states in Latin America	0.4	1.6
Other	3.7	4.8
Not to be determined	2.3	6.4
Total	100.0	100.0

Note: $\chi^2 = 837.838$; $p < 0.001$.

Khrushchev to East Berlin in 1963 (the subject of around 10% of the instructions), the beginning of the Vietnam War in 1965 (around 10%) or the Prague Spring in 1968 (over 5%) could score higher than the amount of instructions targeting media coverage of the FRG (between 22 and 30%) in the course of three years.

Instructions relating to the FRG lost a lot of relevance in the Honecker era (a decline of 25%). During the 1980s the head of the government had to struggle with the internal crisis: nearly two thirds of all instructions to the press dealt with home issues during the last two decades of the GDR. A direct comparison between the Ulbricht time and the last ‘crisis-decade’ of the GDR drives the point home all the more powerfully (Table 2). Over time, instructions to the GDR’s press became more varied, covering more topics. Steering media coverage in the categories of internal and external politics was no longer sufficient to maintain control. One specific figure stands out: Every tenth instruction to the press dealt with the cultural sector, ahead of the permanent issues of agriculture and social policy. The other results point to a trend of crisis management: barely 20% of the instructions have to do with the economy, double that relate to housing and building policy and nonetheless 1.2% concern the church and religion (given that Christian defenders of peace were described as ‘enemies of the state’ by the SED leadership).

What then did the GDR citizen see when he or she opened the daily newspaper? Nothing very unexpected (Figure 1). Whilst a lot of press coverage was dedicated to the FRG before the construction of the Wall, the percentage fell continuously after 1961, only to rise again a little at the end of the 1980s. The media coverage of non-socialist states grew in keeping with the development of bilateral diplomatic relations. No other country could compete with the Soviet Union for coverage during the phase

Table 2 Topics Of The Instructions To The Press Dealing With The GDR (Figures In %).

	Era Ulbricht n = 1673	1980ies n = 1532
Domestic policies	34.2	24.9
Foreign affairs	23.8	17.6
Economy	17.8	19.6
Social issues and Education	4.3	5.3
Sport	1.8	1.8
Culture	3.6	10.0
Agriculture and Forestry	7.4	7.3
Sciences/Research/Technology	1.3	2.5
Social housing/Construction	1.0	3.6
Religion	0.1	1.2
Personal affairs	1.3	1.6
Catastrophes/Disasters/Accidents	0.3	0.3
History/Holiday festivals/Anniversaries	1.1	1.6
Other	2.0	2.5
Total	100.0	99.8

Note: $\chi^2 = 137.612$; $p < 0.001$.

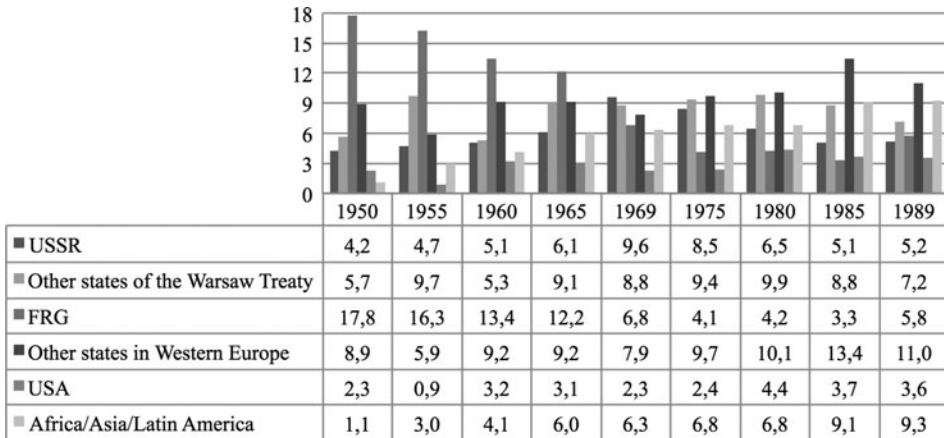


Figure 1 The reporting on foreign affairs in all newspapers in the course of time (Figures in %).

Note: GDR, other socialist states, other non-socialist states, Oceania, other (missing).
 N = 14585; $\chi^2 = 1090.0$; $p < 0.001$.

of political recognition and it was only in the crisis years (1980 to 1989) that the percentages sank back to 5%. Gorbachev was not supposed to get as much attention as Leonid Brezhnev had. These values correspond to the results relative to the nationalities of the protagonists: before 1961 more citizens of the FRG were quoted in the press (of course, mainly those who expressed critical views of the FRG); on the other hand, in the 1970s and 1980s there were more voices from other Western European countries, Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The content analysis also shows when the SED leadership fantasised about having achieved legitimacy. Between 1969 and 1980 they indulged in publishing a large amount of socialist rhetoric when the GDR was gaining international recognition (Figure 2). Nearly all the categories that served to measure the propaganda capacity had reached their highest scores in 1975 with the exception of one category: slogans. In the course of that year the values measured were partly double or threefold the amount measured in the other decades. During the 1950s and in the phase of internal political stabilisation, as well as during the crisis years (1985–1989), most values were comparatively lower. It is striking to see how the curves run parallel – in the shape of a wave – and reach their peak in the 1970s.

Similarly coverage of the West underwent change in all the newspapers simultaneously in the form of a descending curve. Whilst the four major press outlets published particularly negative coverage of the West in the phase after the creation of the GDR state (with *Neues Deutschland* and *Junge Welt* taking the lead and *Der Morgen* lagging behind), the tone changed right after the building of the Wall and became more measured and eventually stabilised on a constant level during the phase of recognition (Figures 3 and 4). The same goes for the positive coverage of non-

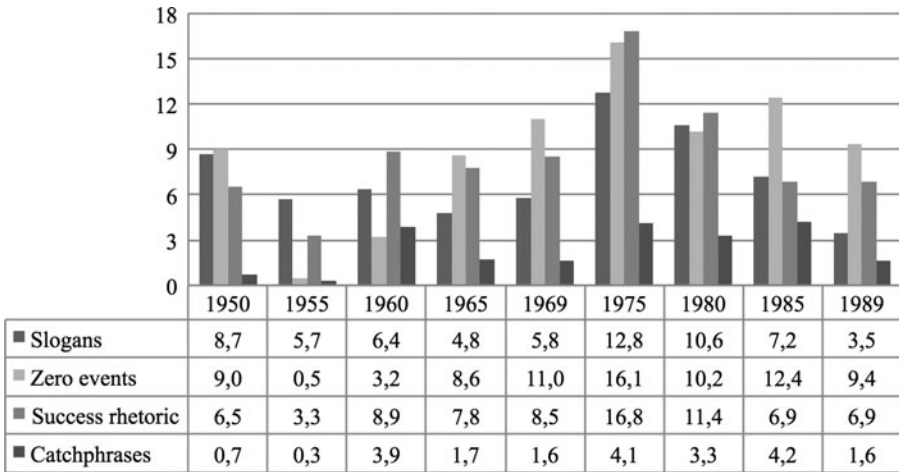


Figure 2 Propagandistic rhetoric in the headlines of all newspapers in the course of time (Figures in %).

Note: Slogans $N = 12259$; $\chi^2 = 157.8$; $p < 0.001$; Zero events $N = 12255$; $\chi^2 = 205.1$; $p < 0.001$; Success rhetoric $N = 12241$; $\chi^2 = 182.2$; $p < 0.001$; Catchphrases $N = 12261$; $\chi^2 = 84.2$; $p < 0.001$.

socialist countries even though the number of statements is more limited and the statistical curves do not run exactly parallel. Yet the figures point to the fact that there was more freedom in the newsrooms before the building of the Wall in 1961 than after. The exceptionally high figures in the year 1955 (mainly in *Der Morgen* with nearly

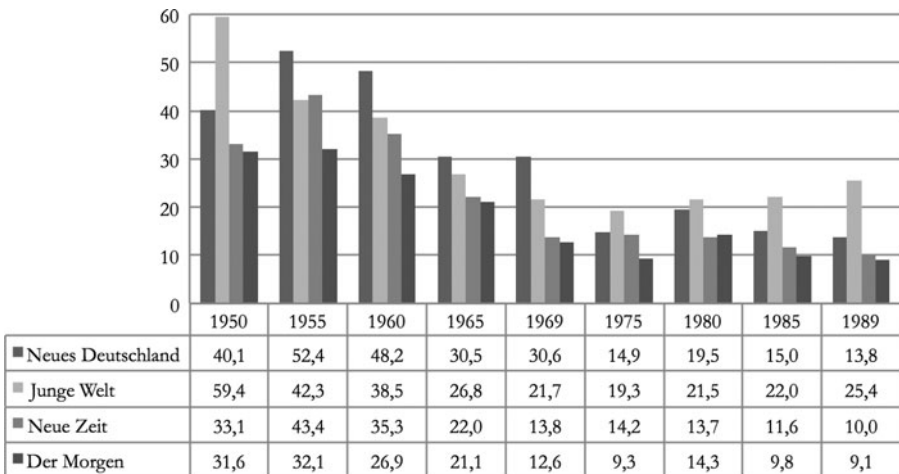


Figure 3 Negative reporting about the capitalist world in the course of time (Figures in %).

Note: Neues Deutschland: $N = 4442$; $\chi^2 = 374.1$; $p < 0.001$; Junge Welt: $N = 2436$; $\chi^2 = 93.6$; $p < 0.001$; Neue Zeit: $N = 2934$; $\chi^2 = 185.9$; $p < 0.001$; Der Morgen: $N = 3580$; $\chi^2 = 165.7$; $p < 0.001$.

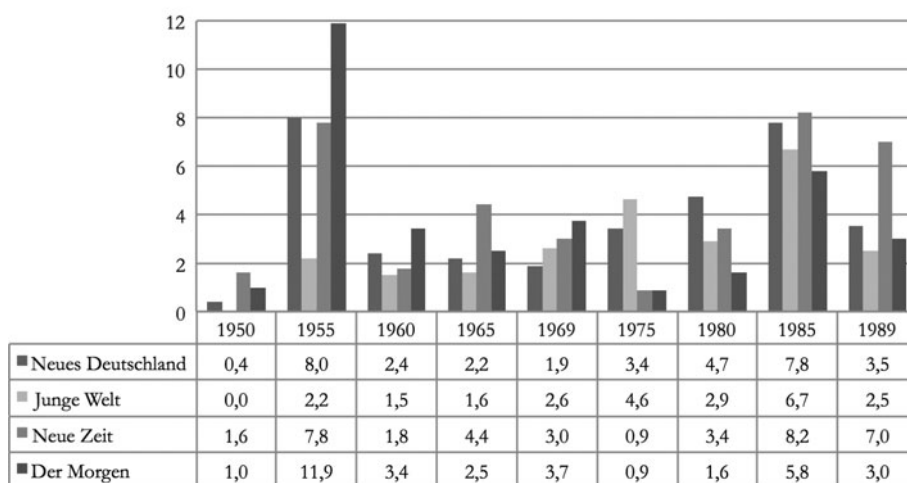


Figure 4 Positive reporting about the capitalist world in the course of time (Figures in %). Note: Neues Deutschland: N = 4441; $\chi^2 = 63.9$; $p < 0.001$; Junge Welt: N = 2428; $\chi^2 = 25.5$; $p < 0.001$; Neue Zeit: N = 2932; $\chi^2 = 46.6$; $p < 0.001$; Der Morgen: N = 3581; $\chi^2 = 63.0$; $p < 0.001$.

12%) can partially be explained by the fact that the mechanism of media steering in the GDR was not yet very rigid and refined. On the other hand, because the border line between the GDR and the FRG was still open, this inevitably contributed to a more realistic news coverage and to a lesser 'difference between facts and artefacts' in the media.

Second Thesis

This thesis can be summed up with the formula: 'uniformity with profile'. Homogeneity characterised in particular the sections of the newspapers that the SED leadership considered important: politics and the economy (regularly published on pages 1 to 3). The more one leafed through towards the back pages, the greater the chance of stumbling across an original item such as a poem, a story, a comment on sports targeted to specific audiences.

As suggested earlier, the SED leadership dedicated a great deal of attention to instructions related to internal and international politics and to the economy (Table 2). If the adjective 'uniform' can be used to describe the GDR press, then it especially applies to those pages. These sections not only filled up the largest part of the newspapers, they also relayed instructions from the Central Committee. The central news information service *Allgemeiner Deutscher Nachrichtendienst* (ADN) was mostly quoted as the source of information in the domains of internal and international politics (43% and 59%), the economy (21%), sciences and technology (19%) as well as natural disasters and accidents (15%). The indication of the source ADN made it clear

Table 3 Headlines From 1950 To 1989 (Figures In %).

	Neues Deutschland n = 4246–	Junge Welt n = 2197–	Neue Zeit n = 2688–	Der Morgen n = 3100–
The headline contains . . .	4261	2205	2690	3109
. . . socialist slogans	11.0	9.1	5.3	3.3
. . . socialist catchphrases	3.8	5.3	0.9	0.4
. . . socialist success rhetoric	13.7	10.5	5.8	4.7
. . . political zero events	13.9	11.3	5.8	6.5
. . . superfluous words	15.0	16.6	15.8	14.9
. . . reading stimuli	7.5	14.3	17.3	16.5

Note: Slogans N = 12259; $\chi^2 = 179.1$; $p < 0.001$; Catchphrases N = 12261; $\chi^2 = 179.8$; $p < 0.001$; Success rhetoric N = 12241; $\chi^2 = 223.6$; $p < 0.001$; Zero events: N = 12255; $\chi^2 = 174.4$; $p < 0.001$; Superfluous words N = 12264; $\chi^2 = 4.1$; $p > 0.05$ (non significant) Reading stimuli: N = 12261; $\chi^2 = 195.0$; $p < 0.001$.

that the information was steered. The news agency mainly served ‘the foreign correspondents for the electronic and print media [. . . and], thus exercised critical selective influence over what information could be publicized in the GDR media, especially in terms of foreign affairs.’⁴¹ There was more room for free expression in the culture, education and society, and even agriculture sections. In the four newspapers examined, there were contributions by a number of authors and guest writers, or articles attributed to the newspaper itself.

During the timeframe adopted for this research, ‘steered’ sections, such as politics and international relations, formed the mainstay of all four newspapers although their coverage of these topics was nuanced, reflecting the ‘social management of difference’. The *Neues Deutschland* was, to all intents and purposes, the mouthpiece of the leadership and it had the largest sections on international politics and economy (over 50% of the overall content while 58% of its articles contained a political statement). With the exception of sports and culture (each of which made up around 10%), other topics were rather under-represented. *Junge Welt*, for all its politicisation (nearly 57% of all articles contained at least one political statement), retained a sports focus (over 17% of its content). No other newspaper dealt with sports so extensively. With 2% of articles dedicated to the coverage of court cases, the *Junge Welt* was not about to win any medals but the mouthpiece of the Free German Youth kept ahead of the other papers in this domain. These findings are supported by the typical coverage of the papers. *Neues Deutschland* and *Junge Welt* put politicians, officials and political organisations under the spotlight playing a central role in around 60% of news stories. Next came the rank and file of the population, the workers and the employees (around 14%). In addition, the *Junge Welt* contained more articles about youth (7.5%) and members of the Free German Youth (nearly 9%) than other papers.

⁴¹ Boyer, *Spirit and System*, 128.

Culture, the Church and a touch of conservatism was the focus of *Neue Zeit*. The mouthpiece of the Christian Democratic Union party was less politicised than *Neues Deutschland* and *Junge Welt* (41% about politics and the economy with political statements in around 35% of the articles) and showed a greater interest in culture (13%), as well as sciences and technology (over 7%). Religious topics accounted for only around 4% but, in comparison, the other dailies had no religious coverage. A proportion of slightly over 5% of 'Christian statements' (Christian messages, virtues or slogans) point to the interests of the target audience.

Anyone who preferred to withdraw from the world of politics could fall back on *Der Morgen* with its limited sections on politics and the economy (34%) and comparatively few political statements (29%), but no other newspaper offered as much content related to culture (over 15%), sciences and technology (over 8%), leisure and travel (6%), and human interest stories (6%). In *Neue Zeit* and in *Der Morgen* less than half of the articles were written about actors from the political spectrum, whereas, in both papers, the focus was more on regional politics than in the other papers. As well as the newspapers' different thematic focus, the people featured in their pages varied: citizens made up 15% and 18% of those covered in *Neue Zeit* and *Der Morgen* respectively, artists 10% and 11%, while representatives of the sectors of the industry and service providers 8% and 11%, more than in *Neues Deutschland* and *Junge Welt*. The *Neue Zeit* reported more often about church ministers and Christians (around 6%). Whenever there was a reference to membership of a political party in the *Neue Zeit* it was the Christian Democratic Union (36%) and in *Der Morgen*, of course, the Liberal Democratic Party of Germany (nearly 41%).

All newspapers offered a socialist representation of the world, expressed in the dominance of socialist forces. Nearly half of all the protagonists were from the GDR and over 60% represented the field of the socialist economy. The others came from the FRG (9%), other Western European countries (7%), the United States (4%) as well as Asian, African and Southern American countries (together around 8%). For the most part news coverage in all four newspapers dealt with the GDR (over 50%). *Neues Deutschland* carried slightly more news from abroad (mainly from other socialist countries). Only around one third of space available in the newspapers was dedicated to non-socialist countries or to neutral regions of the world. All the four press outlets show a high degree of similarity in this respect.

Third Thesis

The leading party's political PR operation conveyed its message to newspapers according to target groups on the assumption that its messages would have a better chance of reaching specific segments of the population.

Neues Deutschland was a political newspaper in which content took precedence over form (Table 3). It had an overwhelming proportion of news and reports (over 70%), little interest in services (less than 10%), limited presence of teasers in layout and headlines but more socialist slogans (11%), catchphrases (4%), and success rhetoric

(14%). In this regard, during the first two decades of the GDR reporting about the capitalist world was particularly negative. The *Neues Deutschland* was keen on finding 'progressive' voices in the West and practically shunned any critical views of the situation in the GDR or in the socialist countries (Figures 3 and 4). What was at stake here amounted to the line to be followed by the journalists as well as by major and lesser members of the party. It is probable that this trend grew even stronger over the years. The instructions, telegraphed by the Division for Agitation of the Central Committee of the SED to the newspapers and the Secretaries for Agitation in the regional offices of the SED, were gradually replaced from the beginning of the 1970s by debate sessions in the Central Committee and telephone calls. This shrunk the numbers of functionaries who were directly involved in the media steering and boosted the role of newspapers with tight links to the general secretary.

Junge Welt, for its part, could more or less do as it pleased, as long as it painted a rosy image of socialism (catchphrases 9%, success rhetoric 11%) and because its attacks against class enemies were particularly vicious. The mouthpiece of the Free German Youth published more pictures than all other papers (nearly 30%), better headlines (teasers: 14%), it exploited all genres and produced many more in-house features. It became increasingly more distinct from the *Neues Deutschland* in the course of the 1980s: the mouthpiece of the SED's boredom, blank spaces and limited news content contrasted with the *Junge Welt's* personalised approach, its creative journalism and responsiveness to readers' expectations. Yet, at the same time, the newspaper of the Free German Youth adopted an increasingly negative attitude towards the Western world during the 1970s and 1980s whereas the other papers became more moderate.

Der Morgen and *Neue Zeit*, of course, also supported the cause of socialism yet they differed from *Neues Deutschland* and *Junge Welt* in that they tailored their offering to specific target groups (*Der Morgen* for artists, workers and scientists, *Neue Zeit* for conservative bourgeois readers) and tended to avoid extreme positions. The *Neue Zeit* was reluctant to publish propaganda pieces (catchphrases 5%, socialist slogans 1%, success rhetoric 6%). *Der Morgen* was the least inclined to reproduce socialist rhetoric (hardly any catchphrases and slogans) and tended to use more original headlines (nearly 17%). The mouthpieces of the Christian Democratic Union and of the Liberal Democratic Party of Germany published fewer political documents than *Neues Deutschland* and *Junge Welt*. *Der Morgen* printed the largest amount of readers' letters, photographic reports and practical guides. Both papers insisted on services to their readers: the *Neue Zeit* (14.3%) again above *Der Morgen* (13.1%) and *Junge Welt* (10.1%). Whereas *Neues Deutschland* and *Junge Welt* made use of nearly 40% of ADN news, *Neue Zeit* and *Der Morgen* used only 21%.

Conclusion

It is certainly not the purpose of the present research to revolutionise the image of the GDR daily printed press. Anyone on the lookout for common stereotypes about the GDR press will also find them evidenced in the data examined here. All the four

newspapers were strongly politicised right from the front pages. There were boring headlines, catchphrases and slogans, few pictures and even less variety. Readers got a sample of what was to be found in the documents of the ruling party (socialism and class struggle), little that might have raised their interest (personal, disasters, accidents, crime) and virtually nothing about issues that they needed, for example, information about the reality of the 'people's economy' or public opinion in the country. Since journalism in the GDR had always been a part of the political field, there was no chance that the logic of the media (such as selection of news according to its relevance or a reader-friendly approach) could assert itself. On the contrary, the interests of the politicians always ranked first, reflecting the evolution of the political context. It was the duty of newspapers to support socialism. This meant that it was necessary to promote the ideals and successes of the system, even and in particular by comparison with capitalism and, first and foremost, with West Germany. This point is of great importance: unlike other socialist countries in Eastern Europe, the GDR rulers were in an enduring competition for the more attractive system and needed to justify the division of the German nation and the poor economic achievements of the GDR in comparison with the West.

The fact that the newspapers took different approaches in their back pages with respect to culture, science and sports had to do with the will of the SED to reach out to the segments of the population who tended to be sceptical vis-à-vis the GDR political project. This included a 'social management of difference' (youth-, Christian- or liberal-oriented use of language) as well as a measure of freedom in the practice of journalism.

It goes without saying that the citizens of the GDR, just like the main protagonists of the political PR operation (politicians, diplomats, entrepreneurs and artists associated with the GDR) were aware of the objectives and mechanisms of media steering and read the papers as official statements of the SED. Of course it was possible (for anyone with an interest in politics) to draw conclusions not only about the stance and the actual objectives of the GDR leadership but also about opponents' opinions regarding internal and external conflict zones as well as economic problems because one could use the Western media and bring in one's own perceptions. Yet correspondents from Western Germany could not access information that was exclusively made available to members of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the SED and were even less likely to access verbal propaganda.⁴²

The uniformity of the press (which can easily be extended to include radio and television broadcasts) led to a weakening of the capacity to innovate and the same can be said with regard to public opinion. Even if one could hear critical voices within one's own family, at the workplace or in the commune, it was impossible to learn from the media how many people shared that opinion or whether the SED's legitimacy was shaky or not (essential for one's own public positions). Western media outlets could not replace information emanating from the inner circles of power because, just like

⁴² Denis Fengler, 'Westdeutsche Korrespondenten in der DDR', in *Journalisten und Journalismus in der DDR*, ed. Jürgen Wilke (Cologne: Böhlau, 2007), 79–216.

personal encounters, they did not represent more than individual positions. The Institute for Research on Public Opinion of the Central Committee of the SED that was entrusted with the responsibility of delivering representative results (that were never made public) was closed down by order of Erich Honecker in 1979 and the reports on public opinion kept in the Federal Archives remained classified information.⁴³

One more element emerges as a result of the study: even though the use of socialist slogans diminished in the 1980s, GDR citizens tend to remember the news coverage right before the fall of the Wall as particularly unbearable, as demonstrated by historical interviews with GDR citizens questioned about their media use in the 1980s, more than 10 years after reunification.⁴⁴ Of course, one may argue that their memories may have been distorted in the light of the fall of the Wall and their experiences in reunified Germany. But research on the role of petitions in the GDR supports this thesis: as in many other Eastern European socialist countries, the communist party determined daily life and living conditions in the GDR and, for this reason, it was quite common that citizens addressed their issues to those in power. By law, all petitions had to be registered and answered in a timely manner or passed on to the respective authorities. Research in this field shows that people had more tolerance of the resounding propaganda of the 1970s because, at the time, they had more belief in the GDR's achievements. At that time, Honecker's new economic and social order was bearing fruit; the living standard in the GDR became noticeably better. The general acceptance of the party and government within the population was growing, as the waning number of petitions to official bodies indicated: between 1973 and 1976 petitions reached their lowest level in the history of the GDR. The SED leadership interpreted this as a consequence of Honecker's 'consumer socialism'.⁴⁵ While there was a slowdown of complaints in the 1970s, the Secretary General office received thousands and thousands of complaints during the 1980s, the GDR's decade of decline. Most petitions were linked to housing problems and to the so-called German question, but also to the GDR's media coverage, which was openly criticised. People always wanted to visit family and friends in the West and, towards the end of the GDR, people repeatedly sought to emigrate.⁴⁶

These findings contradict common propaganda theories that postulate a larger effect of the media.⁴⁷ The reality of life was obviously stronger than the media

⁴³ Heinz Niemann, *Hinterm Zaun. Politische Kultur und Meinungsforschung in der DDR – die geheimen Berichte an das Politbüro der SED* (Berlin: Edition Ost, 1995).

⁴⁴ Meyen, *Denver Clan und Neues Deutschland*.

⁴⁵ Ina Merkel and Felix Mühlberg, 'Eingaben und Öffentlichkeit', in *Wir sind doch nicht die Meckerecke der Nation! Briefe an das Fernsehen der DDR*, ed. Ina Merkel, (Berlin: Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf, 2000), 11–46.

⁴⁶ Felix Mühlberg, *Bürger, Bitten und Behörden. Geschichte der Eingabe in der DDR*, (Berlin: Dietz, 2004), 233.

⁴⁷ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*; Friedrich and Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*.

construct. The citizens of the GDR only tolerated a certain measure of difference between fact and fiction so they resented the reduction of propaganda in the 1980s because it did not correspond in any manner to their daily lives.

It remains an open question whether the steering of the media operated exactly in the same way in the other socialist states of Eastern Europe. The similar historical and political context, the societal role of the media in socialism and the available strategic documents dealing with media policy between the GDR and its Eastern European allies seem to indicate a degree of similarity.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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