

Global Media and Communication

<http://gmc.sagepub.com/>

The role of external broadcasting in a closed political system: A case study of the German post-war states

Michael Meyen and Andreas Scheu

Global Media and Communication 2011 7: 115

DOI: 10.1177/1742766511410219

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://gmc.sagepub.com/content/7/2/115>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Global Media and Communication* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://gmc.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://gmc.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://gmc.sagepub.com/content/7/2/115.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Jul 27, 2011

[What is This?](#)



The role of external broadcasting in a closed political system: A case study of the German post-war states

Global Media and Communication

7(2) 115–128

© The Author(s) 2011

Reprints and permission:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1742766511410219

gmc.sagepub.com



Michael Meyen

University of Munich, Germany

Andreas Scheu

University of Munster, Germany

Abstract

This article investigates the role and impact of external broadcasting (radio and television) on a closed political system, through the example of the two post-war German states: the West German Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the East German German Democratic Republic (GDR). The aim is to debunk myths about the influence of external broadcasting on the events that led to German reunification in 1990. The study follows a historical approach and discusses what role external media played during the years of a divided Germany. The findings are based on several historical sources, research reports from the 1950s and 1960s and over 100 biographical interviews with former residents of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The article analyses the impact of external broadcasting on citizens and the political elite in times of crisis as well as during everyday life.

Keywords

Cold War, external media, Germany, media and political change, media effects

This article examines the role and impact of external broadcasting (radio and television) in the two post-war German states: the West German Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the East German German Democratic Republic (GDR), and, firstly, challenges the

Corresponding author:

Professor Dr Michael Meyen, Universität München, Institut für Kommunikationswissenschaft und Medienforschung Oettingenstraße 67, 80538 München, Germany.

Email: www.ifkw.lmu.de/meyen

assumption that the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and German reunification in 1990 could be attributed to the role of Western media. This includes debunking myths or wishful thinking about strong media effects and media users that are primarily interested in political information. Secondly, the benefits of external broadcasting or the lack thereof are debated, not only because in the 'age of information' (Castells, 1996), any kind of information seems only a few mouse clicks away, but also because people's attitudes are also determined by transnational TV stations such as CNN, MTV or *Al-Jazeera* (Chalaby, 2003). Against this background it seems fair to ask why tax-payers in leading Western societies still pay a great deal of money in order to run broadcasting stations like *Voice of America*, *BBC World* or *Deutsche Welle*, long after the Cold War has ended and when all forms of media from around the world are instantly available on the internet.

The end of the Cold War seemed to mark the end of external broadcasting. Smaller stations such as *Radio Austria International* were closed and countries like Germany cut their budget for external transmissions. *Deutsche Welle* abandoned all broadcasts to Western countries and to the Eastern European transitional states and decreased the number of languages in its radio programs from 38 to 30. In the USA, only insistent protests (among others by the Czech president Vaclav Havel, a former dissident) kept President Clinton from closing *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* after he entered the White House in 1993. The broadcasting station nevertheless had to put up with heavy reductions of its budget, a move from Munich to the cheaper Prague and finding a new rationale (Parta, 2003). However, this trend was reversed after 11 September 2001 (Hahn, 2008: 30): the budgets of the BBC World Service (2007: 382 million Euro) and the US external broadcasting stations (2005: 370 million Euro) were significantly increased and in 2007 France invested 128 million Euros in a new English-speaking external TV station (France 24). Nevertheless, Mark Hopkins, manager of *Voice of America* bureaux in Beijing, Moscow and London, argued as early as 1999 that proof of the influence of 'Radio Free This-and-That' on attitudes of listeners or viewers was nonexistent or anecdotal at best (Hopkins, 1999). Researchers have not only failed to prove the effects of external media but cannot usually even answer the relatively easy question of the number of users. Even where representational surveys are permitted and possible (where there are adequate research facilities, for example) such surveys are not very productive, as most respondents do not use external media. Does it make sense to run external media in a globalized and networked world, when its effects are arguable and it is not even known if the broadcasts are received at all?

This article discusses the impact of external broadcasting by analyzing the efforts of both post-1945 German states. There are many reasons for this kind of historical approach.

First, the parallel broadcasts from FRG and the GDR targeting each other's populations provide a rich case for assessing the usage and effect of external broadcasting broadcasts. The broadcasts did not have to cross a language or a cultural border and had good reception in almost all regions of the states. In the GDR, radio programs from West Germany and from stations like RIAS ('Radio in the American Sector') or *Radio Free Europe* could be received throughout the country (at least via medium waveband), and 85 per cent of viewers were able to watch Western TV broadcasts (Dittmar, 2004; Meyen and Hillman, 2003). What distinguishes the German-German example from other cases

of external broadcasting, is that national broadcasting stations fulfilled a double role: they produced content for their own and for a foreign audience.

Secondly, the historical perspective uses archival sources that not only tell us about usage and acceptance of external broadcasts by the population but also about effects of external broadcasts on the national media and the political system.

Thirdly, by considering a period of 40 years it is possible to find out about long-term empirical effects of external media. Until now, the only study was that of *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, which only gave a snapshot of their programs' coverage and image in Eastern Europe and the Middle East (Parta, 2003).

Fourthly, it is incontestable that the Western media influenced GDR citizens, that people from the GDR searched for news from the 'free world' (Sola Pool, 1973). Domestic programs were controlled by the Communist Party (SED) and seen as not trustworthy from the beginning. The party elite also tried to cut off the flow of information from the West. They forbade importing newspapers and magazines, put up interfering transmitters (particularly against RIAs) and exerted moral pressure – most of all felt until the end of the GDR by those who tried to make a career there (Meyen and Schwer, 2007).

This article will first deal with the potentials and restrictions of media offerings that are designed for a target group living in a different country and which are usually funded by a state. Before the findings will be discussed, there will be a section dealing with the sources used for this study. Because existing surveys about the usage of media in the GDR did not ask about external media and because the aim of this article is to debunk myths about the power of external broadcasts, this article is not only based on records and passed down opinion poll findings but also on biographical interviews conducted between 2000 and 2002 about everyday media usage in the German Democratic Republic.

Limits of limitless communication

External media have always had problems with legitimization (Browne, 1982). Those who finance external broadcasts (regardless if it is the state, religious organizations or political groups) have to live with the suspicion of propaganda. Why for example would the US invest money in broadcasts, if those broadcasts did not represent American interests? Can such broadcasts be unbiased and should they be? Can one refute the argument that this leads to either national navel-gazing or to a passing on of a formalistic logic of objectivity, which in fact prevents professional journalism (Hafez, 2005)? In general: why and for whom are such media offerings produced?

In the 1970s and 1980s the West was accused of undermining national sovereignty and of trying to incite overthrow attempts under the guise of the 'free flow of information', mostly by Eastern European countries but also by those in Asia and Africa. At the plenary meeting of the UN in 1972, the Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko even demanded that permission for cross-border broadcasts should be given only if the 'receiving country' explicitly agreed beforehand. Interfering transmitters for RIAs and (moral) prohibition of reception for un-'approved' broadcasts look like legitimate defense strategies from this point of view.

Doubts regarding purity, quality and credibility are broadcast simultaneously along with the original program. Connected to them are doubts concerning the effects of the

broadcasts. When *BBC World* and *Radio Moscow* started in the 1920s and 1930s, belief in the power of media offerings and strong media effects were part of the context of their development (McQuail, 2005: 458), beliefs that were strengthened by watching the actions of Communists and National Socialists, even though historically their propaganda ended in failure.

Communication research has shown how limited media effects are and how strongly they depend on the nature of the recipient and their context, particularly their beliefs, and not only on the transfer of information (DeFleur and Dennis, 2002: 438–439). The understanding of the process now leads to a demand to abandon the tradition of intercultural monologues and to support a ‘dialogue of cultures’ instead (Kleinstüber, 2002). Regardless of the difference between monologue and dialogue, the simple fact that external media only reach small audiences already narrows down their effects. The above mentioned survey of *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* in Eastern Europe and Middle East showed it had an average coverage per week of 9.2 per cent in 2001/02 (Parta, 2003). The background of this survey moreover suggests that this data was actually rather flattering the sponsor. The survey was meant to show that the broadcasting station, although still being regarded as pro-West, was able to get rid of its Cold War image and is now seen as an independent, professional provider of information. Furthermore, audience researchers from external broadcasting stations also work with letters from listeners and viewers, expert discussions and, what Mark Hopkins calls, anecdotes. However, reports from diplomats or travelers are no substitute for a public debate about the quality of the program. Since external media are usually not consumed in the home country, journalists, editors and anchormen working for them are not recognized on the street and their work neither gets praised nor criticized by neighbors, peers or friends. A large segment of the German public, for example, is not aware of *Deutsche Welle*, even though this broadcasting station costs over a quarter of a billion Euros per year. In addition, the conditions inside such an institution can be bureaucratic (Hafez, 2005). Where broadcasts and websites are produced in 30 different languages, coordination and criticism can be difficult, if only because communication between different sections is limited. While other journalists also (and sometimes perhaps particularly) produce for colleagues either working for rival businesses or for the same company (Donsbach, 2002: 213–215) and usually know what the target audience wants to listen to, watch or read (DeFleur and Dennis, 2002: 87–88), external media only have two reference points: politicians and experts.

This is a problem because these two groups have different expectations regarding media offerings than the majority of the population. Research shows that most media users mainly look for entertainment, to relax, fill time, get new topics for conversations and watch role models (Rubin, 2002: 526–527). In addition, there is a desire to know about one’s home environment (region or home country) and home news providers can deliver that and easily keep their own audiences up to date. In contrast, borne out by most surveys, political output (for example radio commentaries or leading articles) only engages a minority audience, except in times of crisis (Perse, 2001: 57–61). The survey on *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* provides a stereotype of a typical listener: an older male, well-educated, higher earner living in a city (Parta, 2003: 76). Therefore the audience for external media is bound to be limited. And the lack of entertaining programs is

only one reason for this. Another reason why the (potential) coverage is further narrowed down lies in the difficulties regarding reception. Many foreign radio programs do not broadcast round-the-clock and often can only be received via short wave.

It also is likely that the target groups do not get what they want. Any organization broadcasting to foreign places has to define a target audience. For whom, for example, is the program of *Voice of America* being produced? For American emigrants and their descendants, for instance living in Germany? For Americans, temporarily living abroad? For Latin Americans or Vietnamese people who worked or studied in the US and do not want to lose contact with their former host country? For Arabs or Romanians that have never been to America, but are learning the language and are fans of American culture? Or for people who live in a country without media freedom, who are looking for unbiased information, not about American landscapes and movie releases, but about the situation in their home country? Every answer excludes at least one other part of the potential audience.

Findings about the usage of the *Deutsche Welle* from the 1990s offer a hint of what an audience of external media might expect: the German speaking service was mainly used for information about Germany and to maintain contact with the country (Schönbach and Knobloch, 1995). Today both needs can be better served via the internet.

Sources and methods

In order to answer questions about the usefulness of external media, their effects and functions in closed political systems, this article follows a historical approach and discusses the role external media offerings played during the division and reunification of Germany. This offers the advantage of being able to rely on a relatively broad base of sources because the reception of external media has been the subject of social science research since the beginning of post-war Germany. In West Germany, after the end of World War II, countless representative surveys regarding mass media were conducted (Merritt and Merritt, 1970, 1980). Especially during the 1950s and 1960s the fear of 'red media' – media that spread Soviet propaganda – flooding West Germany caused the government to fund studies that examined reception of East German radio broadcasts and print media. Although this data has generally been lost, the reports survived in various archives.

For the GDR, the availability of sources is more difficult. Although radio and TV audience research was conducted, findings were not published until 1989. They also are of doubtful value – on the one hand because GDR citizens had plenty of reason not to trust the anonymity of the surveys, and on the other because Western media were excluded from this kind of research. Moreover, representative studies were not undertaken until the middle of the 1960s, because the Western powers were not accepted as role models for research, and strong media regulation did not allow representative research. Before this time, methods from the pre World War II years were coupled with analyses of letters to the editors and analyses of public meetings concerning the contents of television, radio programs and newspapers.

In addition to the sources mentioned above, this article is also based on interviews with GDR refugees and West Berlin visitors, carried out by the West German government and

the US authorities in West Germany (Merritt and Merritt, 1980). Of course this data cannot be interpreted without looking at the problems regarding the sample and the interests of the sponsors, but for historians there are problems around whether information comes from official records or questionnaires (Hyman, 1972). The question of reliability has to be addressed for any kind of source. This, however, does not mean that survey results do not have to be checked, classified and evaluated.

One way of doing this is by historical data analysis. According to this method, results from one source are compared to those from other sources, for example different survey results, official statistics, and other forms of data, which gives an insight into the object of study. Comprehension of social reality is best achievable by accumulating as much information as possible: survey results (also those that are not representative) and the views of the survey analysts; literary and scientific works; discourses of popular culture; and the commentaries of professional media observers (Jensen, 1993).

In addition, the following sources have also been utilized: key German media services; professional journals; and more than 100 interviews, held between 2000 and 2002, in which former GDR residents were asked about their everyday media usage during the 1980s. This data offers insight into usage of external broadcasts by people living in a closed political system. Whereas media usage in West Germany has been extensively researched, information about people living in the GDR is rare. When it comes to evaluating the importance of media offerings in daily life, qualitative methods are superior to standardized interviews. The disadvantage of biographical interviews is that they describe typical variables at best, though making no claim to be exhaustive. This kind of interview simply cannot provide information about the distribution of certain patterns of action within the entire population. Furthermore, some of the subjects (in this case: citizens of the former GDR) are no longer alive or too old to remember accurately. Another limitation of biographical interviews is that they require the respondents to be willing and able to talk to a stranger about their life. Both qualities do not prevail to the same degree in the various strata of the population.

In order to allow generalizations, the respondents were selected by theoretical sampling. This technique posits that a field of action, such as media consumption, is characterized by a finite number of varieties (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Lindlof, 1995: 126–131; for an overview see Jensen, 2002). The respondents should resemble the whole diversity of the field of research, whereby assumptions underlying the sampling are complemented and adapted until new cases do not provide additional information. The sample of this survey is based on findings of uses and gratifications research (Rubin, 2002) and knowledge about media usage in industrialized societies. Initially it was assumed that most demographic influences on media usage were transcultural and would not differ between West and East Germany (different media use of men and women, people living in cities and villages, people with different ages and formal education). The second presumption was that the usage and evaluation of media offerings were connected with the population's general attitude towards social systems. For the purposes of the analysis, in relation to the GDR, careerists inside the party apparatus, elected full-time officials and employees in managerial positions were assumed to have approved of the system. On the contrary, people with a religious background, families of artists and doctors, craftsmen, self-employed people, shop owners and those who left the country before the collapse of the regime in 1989 were assumed to have disapproved of it.

The sample¹ was selected according to the theoretical considerations mentioned above. The interviewees were selected according to demographic criteria (age, gender, residence), loyalty to the party line, connection to West Germany, and availability of external broadcasting. The interviews, conducted by trained students of communication studies, were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Since people find it difficult to remember changes over a long period, the interviews focused on the second half of the 1980s. The respondents were asked to reconstruct a normal day in their life, at some time in the final period of the GDR. This helped to refresh memories (media consumption and everyday life are closely interrelated) and to overcome inhibitions. The interview guide only listed the subjects to be discussed, thus enabling respondents to describe their own view of the issues, to mention episodes, and to set priorities. Unlike completely open forms of interviews, the guide ensured a baseline of comparability. It included the following topics: life in former East Germany; access to media programs; patterns of media consumption and motives; media evaluation (credibility, image); and life at present (economic situation, media usage, current image of the GDR).

Research findings

People from West and East Germany agreed upon what they expected from broadcast media right from the beginning. Their expectations were also very similar to those expressed in other industrial societies, that the purpose of radio and TV broadcasts were firstly to provide a pleasant atmosphere at home. Media offerings from the neighboring country were used when the broadcasts of the home country could not meet the demand for entertainment or when reception was bad.

East German broadcasts to the FRG

Until the middle of the 1970s, the GDR broadcast whole radio programs and parts of TV programs to listeners and viewers in the FRG and West Berlin. However, the response was very low and even those who switched on broadcasting stations from the East avoided the ideological messages. Although surveys show that the Eastern music program was praised during the first years after World War II, the respondents already criticized it as having too much propaganda and biased talk. Further development of the broadcasting network in the FRG and the increased focus on the audience's needs led to a drop in the usage of GDR broadcasting stations.

At the beginning of the 1960s, every second listener in the FRG was able to receive an Eastern program, although the best places for reception were West Berlin and the north. The south and the Ruhrgebiet, which would have been particularly important for the GDR because of the high percentage of workers in these areas – the 'working class' has been the ideological target group of the GDR – were shielded from the radio waves from the East by mountain ranges. Only 5 per cent of those who had the possibility switched channels regularly, 22 per cent occasionally switched channels – mostly because of programs that offered music or other forms of entertainment.

Erich Mende, who as Minister of All-German Affairs was entrusted to promote relations with East Germany, praised the entertainment programs of East German radio in

1963. For him, the offerings of the ‘class enemy’ – a term used by people in the West and East to describe representatives of the other political system – seemed more sophisticated, because they contained more classical music. The news, on the other hand, seemed so repulsive to him that he did not consider it to be a threat at all.

Those responsible for GDR radio were aware of such problems and audience expectations, both from reports about reception and listeners’ letters. Nevertheless they continued to broadcast political messages to the FRG and began to promote the further development of their TV network in the middle of the 1950s, as part of the country’s ‘Westplan’. As part of the investment in the economic plan, it was stressed that a developed TV network provided the opportunity to reach a Western audience (Meyen and Hillman, 2003). This in turn was noticed by the FRG and it warned against a ‘flood of red TV broadcasts’. The news magazine *Der Spiegel* feared in 1957 that the GDR TV network was being developed into an instrument of propaganda targeting the West (*Der Spiegel*, 1957: 48). Although this attempt faced the same limitations as the radio broadcasts mentioned above, the All-German ministry in Bonn sponsored several surveys about the reception of Eastern programs. Those surveys show that the GDR TV program was mainly used as an alternative, when there were no entertaining programs running on the home station. Films, entertainment and sports reached the widest audience, with the proviso that there was a limit to the amount of political content that most West Germans would accept in entertainment programs, as the polling firm Infratest established (Infratest, 1959, 1961).

Although surveys showed that GDR TV programs, as with radio programs, could only be received in parts of the FRG and were used for entertainment purposes, if at all, the topic was made into a political issue. This was because workers as a group were over-represented in the results and they rated the Eastern broadcasts slightly higher than the rest of West German respondents. Infratest pointed out the low level of education of this group of viewers and warned against ‘ideological infiltration’ (Infratest, 1959: 26–30; 58). Media experts and the FRG government demanded that details of GDR TV programs were not printed in TV guides.

When the publishing company Axel Springer Verlag and other big newspapers acceded to this demand in the early 1960s, small magazines were the ones to profit. They were immediately able to increase their print runs by including information about GDR TV programs. The boycott therefore only lasted four years, even though Axel Springer Verlag lobbied several government authorities like the Bundespresseamt, the Postministerium and the Bundestag for a general prohibition on printing GDR TV program details (Bundesarchiv Koblenz, B 145, Nr. 3692).

GDR’s television programming also influenced program planning of FRG broadcasting corporations. The Eastern competitors were a continuous issue at conferences of broadcasting managers during the late 1950s and 1960s (Jansen, 1988). This accelerated the development of entertainment programs and increased the focus on the audience, thus benefiting even viewers who could not receive GDR TV. Broadcasting managers and the FRG government always stressed that the GDR possessed unlimited economic resources, even though it was well known that this was far from true, and that they soon would be able to extend their broadcasts to the Ruhrgebiet, although both surveys and technical experts stated the opposite (Meyen, 1999). The development of radio programming was

also aided by this competition. For example, the introduction of a night-time show in 1952 was justified with the argument that GDR offerings would otherwise have no competition at this time.

When arguing about such kinds of changes, politicians were able to refer to the needs of the 'brothers and sisters in the East'. Similar to RIAS or *Radio Free Europe*, the public broadcasting stations of the FRG carried out the task of informing the population of the GDR and of carrying on the idea of a reunified Germany. Thereby the broadcasting stations promoted West Germany's aim of reunification – which was anchored in the German constitution ('Grundgesetz') – against the interests of the GDR officials. This is one reason why West Germany was able to see itself as the winning party after 1989, even though it was the citizens of East Germany who initiated the fall of the Berlin Wall, the development that led to unification.

West German broadcasts to the GDR

That the Western media played a part during the initial phase of the radical change in the GDR is part of the founding myth of the reunified Germany. The short version: West German broadcasting stations and RIAS were not only the 'window to the world' for the population of the GDR, but also informed them about what really happened in the GDR, which was concealed by the Communist Party media. So they 'unmasked' the 'Real Existing Socialism' and also provoked a comparison of living standards between East and West. In the long run, even advertisements, family programs and quiz shows, it is said, contributed to the collapse of the regime – because people from the GDR had been sensitized to their own country's supply bottlenecks and bad quality of goods by permanently being confronted with the Western range of goods (Hesse, 1990).

However, the findings of the present survey indicate that the relevance of external media for the GDR and probably for other East European countries as well, has been overrated. There are several reasons for this conclusion. It is certainly true that experiences during the autumn of 1989, reports by West German TV stations about demonstrations and the occupation of embassies, escape routes and opposition groups played an important role for the protests as such and for initiating changes like the fall of the Berlin Wall and the process of reunification. Nevertheless, it must be considered that the autumn of 1989 was a time of crisis and that functions of media systems for societies change during such times. The need for entertainment becomes less important, whereas the need for information gains priority and media usage increases. Yet, a crisis is not an everyday phenomenon. Communication science still fails to understand the paramount importance of daily routines and patterns in shaping the communication needs of people living in closed political systems. Just as the predominant wish for entertainment was underestimated, scholarship has overestimated the general need for information in closed societies. This overestimation is partly due to the usage of doubtful sources without further reflection in earlier studies – such as letters by dissidents, who naturally feel a greater need for information and cannot be considered representative of the general population (Sola Pool, 1973).

The present findings indicate that expectations of media neither depend primarily on political and media systems, nor on specific media content. Apart from time and income,

communication needs are rather shaped by the specific working and living conditions of individuals and the complexity of a particular society. In the sample of biographical interviews, respondents who were gainfully employed in the GDR, held a subordinate position in the professional hierarchy or were busy meeting the numerous requirements of everyday life, used the media primarily as a means of diversion and relaxation, and usually gave little thought to political coverage. Many women did not even have time to watch the news on West German TV. A mother of four, born in 1930, stated: 'It was only my husband who watched the news. Personally, I was not interested. I could hardly tell what had happened throughout the years'. Consequently, they were even less interested in political magazines. A female hairdresser, born in 1954, mother to a disabled child – indicators for only limited leisure time – explained her lack of interest in politics: 'Political news was all flim-flam. I simply did not listen to it anymore'. This statement also refers to the strict regulation of media content in the GDR which led to a kind of journalism that promoted the interests of the political elite rather than the control of political decision-making.

Many East German media programs did meet certain needs of GDR citizens. Light entertainment programs, TV serials and feature films were part of everyday life, so were East German radio programs or one of the party newspapers. 'East German movies were alright, so were the shows and sports news', said a marketing executive, born in 1949, who was an active member of church and distanced herself from the leading party. 'Sometimes I even got excited when watching the sports news from the East, even though I don't count myself to be fanatic about sports.' None of the respondents expressed that they trusted the GDR media. Especially those interviewees in touch with the blue-collar industries (factories, the craft sector and trade) gave numerous examples of the ways in which the economic situation was glossed over or biased by the media. A postman, born in 1962, classified East German mass media as a huge propaganda campaign 'one could hardly listen to or watch'.

However, West German media were not an adequate alternative for most of the respondents. Advice programs could not be applied to the situation in the East, nor did the news or political magazines offer much help in managing everyday life. 'The West did not know anything about the East', a female worker, born in 1938, explained. 'I watched East German news because I had to come to terms with daily life here in the GDR.' Furthermore, almost all respondents were skeptical of the credibility of West German media. Biased media coverage was perceived as absolutely normal, since propaganda was a part of everyday life. Why should West German reports be different? The fact that the media coverage from Western broadcasting stations often collided with the self-perception of the respondents confirmed those suspicions: 'The West has decried the East' and 'depicted a primitive picture of us', a mother of four, born in 1930, recalled. The respondents therefore rather looked 'for the truth somewhere in between': by listening to both sides and talking to acquaintances, they formed their own opinion. A female accountant, born in 1954, emphasized: 'The West has always been painted in black and white, so has the East. Both sides did not miss a chance to smear the other. If some issues hardly made it into the East German news, they certainly received huge publicity in West German media'.

In addition, many respondents did not necessarily change channels in order to get information. Although they watched the news and political documentaries, their main

aim was entertainment, helping them to relax. A survey by Infratest, funded by the East German ministry of the FRG, shows that in 1955 not even one out of three GDR citizens could name an anchorman or commentator of RIAS, and in 1958 only 24 per cent of the Eastern respondents could remember the contents of a political broadcast. Infratest classified those 24 per cent as 'real' listeners with a 'strong' interest in politics (Infratest, 1955, 1958). The biographical interviews helped to locate those 'real' listeners and viewers in the social context (mainly in the peripheries of churches, in milieux where artists or intellectuals were rooted, as well as in professions that were considered politically less relevant and therefore were lower paid), and showed that even those who decidedly rejected the media policy of the GDR alleged that the West followed certain interests, too, and reacted skeptically.

This, however, does not imply that Western programs have been without effects. Although some broadcasts seemed to be propaganda to the East Germans: the fact that there was a polar opposite stimulated thinking. Can one believe in certain facts and not question them, while permanently being confronted with doubts? The efforts of the party to cut off the flow of information from the West by interfering transmitters or moral pressure actually contributed to those doubts. Surveys about the use of media, initiated by governmental broadcasting or the party elite showed that these efforts failed, because of the stubbornness of the GDR citizens. That is why moral pressure eased off gradually, and by the mid-1970s, consumption of West German media was officially tolerated (Steinmetz and Viehoff, 2004: 320).

Those with a skeptical attitude towards the GDR regime talked about how important Western radio and TV programs were to them. The marketing executive, who sometimes enjoyed East German sports news, argued she could not have lived without West German TV. 'Watching *Tagesschau* was a must. In order to receive this news program, we had a huge antenna on top of the roof.' And a writer, born in 1953, concluded: 'I did not expect the media from the West to reflect our reality here in East Germany. But what I did demand was a different point of view'. Thus good reception of Western programs could mean for some an improvement in their quality of life. A postman said he did not really realize that the communist media was that biased because the opposite side had always been available. This was particularly important in the exceptional circumstances of a crisis. If nobody had listened to the RIAS in June 1953, the Communist Party could not have defamed the broadcasting station as the main instigator of the riots. And who knows how things would have turned out during the autumn of 1989, if the Western media had not reported on the opposition, demonstrations and escapes, thereby prompting media coverage in the GDR.

The example of East Germany also offers the possibility to study the indirect effects of external media. On the one hand, politicians and practitioners dealing with media, both in West and East Germany, exploited the efforts of the other to promote their activities and demand more resources. A good example of this is the GDR TV's 'Westplan' of the late 1950s, even though the technicians knew well that they could only reach a small part of the FRG. In internal discussions the development of the broadcasting network was justified by the need to push back the influence of Western media. On the other hand, programs became more audience-focused in order to prevent listeners and viewers from changing channels. Right from the beginning, GDR radio and TV copied successful programs from the FRG, developed specific programs for adolescents, and from 1982,

broadcast entertainment programs after 8 pm, because it was clear by that time that educational and ideological programs would drive viewers into the arms of the ‘class enemy’ (Dittmar, 2004).

Conclusion

Although there will always be only a limited audience for external informational broadcasts and doubts concerning their credibility, external broadcasting in the language local people understand and about issues they are interested in (Gramsch, 2007) is essential wherever there is no media freedom. Because people are usually interested in entertainment rather than political information, the importance of external broadcasting especially emerges in times of crisis when the need for information increases and when the credibility of local media offerings is doubted. The importance of external broadcasting during such exceptional times is undisputed – not just because alternative information can influence the course of a crisis, as is widely assumed, but because the need for information increases during a crisis. The upside of this is that external broadcasts reach alternative elites. Even though they usually are not very high up the official career ladder, they still can be opinion leaders in their social networks. The great opportunity for external media – if the aim is to initiate political changes – lies in the provision of unbiased information presented in the local language during significant times of change, as shown in the two German states.

However, crises are exceptional. Acknowledging this, the case study also dealt with the function of external broadcasting in everyday life. The example of the media relation between the FRG and the GDR shows that external broadcasting is also influential in normal times. Here, even those who do not use external broadcasting benefit from its existence. Both in West and East Germany, the local media and local media policy reacted to the alternative offerings by improving their own programs and meeting the demands of their audiences. It is also not surprising that the everyday media usage of people in the FRG and the GDR – like anywhere else – was dominated by an interest in entertainment.

Even though ideological messages from the other country were avoided by audiences in West and East Germany, the political elites in both countries were concerned about their possible effects. East Germany in particular spared no efforts to increase the loyalty of the audience; it tried to interfere in reception, which nevertheless failed because of technological limits and because of the ingenuity of the consumers, who took such efforts as a challenge, as shown by the former residents of the GDR. It is clear that politicians overestimate media effects. Even if the myths about the power of propaganda from the West vis-à-vis the East were true, mainly people who were skeptical towards their political regime in the first place, were looking for political information from the ‘class enemy’. Furthermore, there is some indication that politicians and practitioners in charge were not only interested in ‘protecting’ their fellow citizens but that external broadcasting and myths about its effects have been exploited in order to improve their own financial or technological situation. The media offerings from the other political system served to legitimate their activities and demands for funding and resources.

Finally, the existence alone of broadcasting corporations such as the *Voice of America*, the *BBC World Service* or *Deutsche Welle* demonstrates the drive – inwards and outwards – to be represented in the world and the conviction that they know the ‘right’ way.

Note

1. Composition of the sample: gender: 57 women, 44 men; education: 45 high school or university graduates, 56 persons who completed grade 10 or junior high school; age group: born 1930 and earlier – 4, born between 1931 and 1940 – 17, born between 1941 and 1950 – 28; born between 1951 and 1960 – 31; born between 1961 and 1970 – 16; born 1971 and later – 5; other characteristics: 33 persons did not have relatives or friends in the Federal Republic of Germany (criterion: at least regular correspondence or telephone calls); 28 were members of the Communist Party; 23 persons could not receive Western TV programs; 21 persons lived in East German communities with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants; 19 persons professed their faith (criterion: at least occasional attendance of church-organized events or institutions before 1987); 7 persons who fled to West Germany before 1989.

References

- Browne DR (1982) *International Radio Broadcasting: The Limits of the Limitless Medium*. New York: Praeger.
- Castells M (1996) *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, Volume 1: The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Chalaby JK (2003) Television for a new global order. *Gazette* 65(6): 457–472.
- Corbin J and Strauss A (1990) Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons and evaluative criteria. *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 19(6): 418–427.
- DeFleur ML and Dennis EE (2002) *Understanding Mass Communication: A Liberal Arts Perspective*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Der Spiegel* (1957) Konkurrenz: Programm aus dem Osten. *Der Spiegel*, September 4, pp. 48–49.
- Dittmar C (2004) GDR television in competition with West German programming. *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 24(3): 327–343.
- Donsbach W (2002) Psychologische Faktoren hinter Nachrichtenentscheidungen. In: Nawratil U, Schönhagen P and Strakulla Jr. H (eds) *Medien und Mittler sozialer Kommunikation. Beiträge zur Theorie, Geschichte und Kritik von Journalismus und Publizistik. Festschrift für Hans Wagner*. Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 203–224.
- Gramsch C (2007) Have international broadcasters a mission in conflicts? In: Loewenberg S and Nørby Bonde B (eds) *Media in Conflict Prevention and Peace-building Strategies*. Bonn: Deutsche Welle, 178–181.
- Hafez K (2005) *Mythos Globalisierung. Warum die Medien nicht grenzenlos sind*. Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Hahn O (2008) Arabische Öffentlichkeit und Satellitenrundfunk. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 11: 26–31.
- Hesse KR (1990) Fernsehen und Revolution: Zum Einfluss der Westmedien auf die politische Wende in der DDR. *Rundfunk und Fernsehen* 38(3): 328–342.
- Hopkins M (1999) A Babel of broadcasting. *Columbia Journalism Review* 38(2): 44–47.
- Hyman HH (1972) *Secondary Analysis of Sample Surveys: Principles, Procedures and Potentialities*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Infratest (1955) Empfangsmöglichkeiten und Nutzung westdeutscher und westlicher Auslandssender in der SBZ. Ergebnisse einer Umfrage bei Ostzonenflüchtlingen, September/October.
- Infratest (1958) *Rundfunkempfang und Nutzung westlicher Sender in der sowjetischen Besatzungszone*, July.
- Infratest (1959) Empfang und Wirkung sowjetzonaler Fernsehsendungen in der Bundesrepublik. In: *Infratest Burke*. Munich, Archive, A II No. 7/15, pp. 26–30, 58.

- Infratest (1961) *Empfangsmöglichkeiten und Nutzung des 'Deutschen Fernsehfunks' der Sowjetischen Besatzungszone in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*: 3. Untersuchung. Hamburg: Hans-Bredow-Institut, December.
- Jansen M (1988) Hörfunk, Fernsehen und Kalter Krieg. Die 'gesamtdeutschen' Aktivitäten der bundesdeutschen Rundfunkanstalten in den fünfziger und sechziger Jahren. *Mitteilungen des Studienkreises Rundfunk und Geschichte* 14(2): 152–156.
- Jensen K (2002) The qualitative research process. In: Jensen K (ed.) *A Handbook of Media and Communication Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Methodologies*. London: Routledge, 235–253.
- Jensen KB (1993) The past in the future: Problems and potentials of historical reception studies. *Journal of Communication* 43(4): 20–28.
- Kleinsteuber HJ (2002) Auslandsrundfunk in der Kommunikationspolitik. In Hepp A and Löffelholz M (eds) *Grundlagentexte zur transkulturellen Kommunikation*. Konstanz: UVK, 345–372.
- Lindlof T (1995) *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- McQuail D (2005) *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*. London: Sage.
- Merritt AJ and Merritt RL (eds) (1970) *Public Opinion in Occupied Germany: The OMGUS Surveys, 1945–1949*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Merritt AJ and Merritt RL (eds) (1980) *Public Opinion in Semi Sovereign Germany: The HICOG Surveys, 1949–1955*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Meyen M (1999) Geistige Grenzgänger. In: Böning H, Kutsch A and Stöber R (eds) *Jahrbuch für Kommunikationsgeschichte*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 192–231.
- Meyen M and Hillman W (2003) Communication needs and media change: The introduction of television in East and West Germany. *European Journal of Communication* 18(4): 455–476.
- Meyen M and Schwer K (2007) Credibility of media offerings in centrally controlled media systems: A qualitative study based on the example of East Germany. *Media, Culture & Society* 29(2): 285–304.
- Parta RE (2003) How our listeners see us. In: Zöllner O (ed) *Reaching Audiences Worldwide. Perspectives of International Broadcasting and Audience Research*. Bonn: CIBAR, 65–77.
- Perse EM (2001) *Media Effects and Society*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Rubin A (2002) The uses-and-gratifications perspective of media effects. In Bryant J and Zillmann D (eds) *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 525–548.
- Schönbach K and Knobloch S (1995) Die Deutsche Welle und ihr Publikum. In: Mahle WA (eds) *Deutschland in der internationalen Kommunikation*. Konstanz: UVK-Medien, 183–191.
- Sola Pool I de (1973) Communication in totalitarian societies. In: Sola Pool I de, Schramm W, Maccoby N and Parker E (eds) *Handbook of Communication*. Chicago: Rand McNally, 463–474.
- Steinmetz R and Viehoff R (2004) The programme history of genres of entertainment on GDR television. *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 24(3): 317–325.

Biographical notes

Michael Meyen is Professor of Communication science at the Ludwig-Maximilian-University in Munich. His research interests include media use, journalism, history of media and history of communication science.

Dr Andreas Scheu is research assistant at the University of Munster. His research interests include theories of communication studies, mediatization, science journalism and history of communication science.