

The revolt of the Communist journalist: East Germany

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The newspaper is an instrument of power. Its worth originates in the character of the power which it serves. This is expressed both in the ideas it puts forth and how it goes about its business. (Walter Benjamin)

The struggle to capture and remould the Communist mass media apparatus is a vital part of the democratization of eastern European politics — the state of the mass media is one indicator of the state of politics in a country. Nowhere was this political transformation more rapid and fundamental than in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), which disappeared from the community of nations on 3 October 1990. We are tempted to understand this media revolution and the subsequent post-Communist press as resulting from the efforts of East German dissidents who emerged from some zone of banishment, took over the media and ousted the Communist propagandists, ending the 'press problem'.

East German journalists would argue that this assumption is problematic for two reasons. In the heyday of the *Wende*, the high revolutionary period of autumn 1989, the Communist journalists were not evicted, nor was the Communist press drowned out by new journals of opinion. Instead, most of the GDR journalists abandoned the Communist Party, or SED, and joined forces with those intent on bringing down the Communist order altogether. Unlike elsewhere in the former socialist bloc, new journals did not replace the Communist press — the press became non-Communist.

In the eyes of these journalists, problems have again arisen in the 1991 post-Communist press. After experiencing seven months of autonomy, the journalists now mourn the death of the democratic journalism they worked to fashion. The East German journalists, most of them former Communists, today nostalgically refer to this short *Wende*-era journalism (October 1989–April 1990) as the democratic era of GDR journalism. What they proudly established during the post-Communist period of the German Democratic Republic has been dismantled, they claim, by West German direction after reunification.

Today the GDR is but a 'footnote in history'. Since reunification, Christian Democratic Union (CDU) politicians in Bonn directly or indirectly control the eastern German mass media. Through personal interference in the operations of

the *Treuhand*, the agency charged with privatizing East Germany. Chancellor Kohl's and Foreign Minister Genscher's staffs have delivered the financially robust former Communist newspapers into the ownership of 'friendly' conservative West German media giants. Television and radio, just recently wrested from the control of Communist Party *apparatchiks*, are once again under tight political party supervision. Here, CDU politics and representatives dominate the post-reunification broadcasting policy, organization, personnel appointments and programme content. Throughout the entire East German broadcasting system, the East German editorial leaders who had transformed the Communist media and promoted revolution are being replaced by conservative, party-affiliated West German journalists.

In spite of the German federal and state constitutional press protections, the East German journalists complain that this new regimen feels much like the system they fought to reform. What is the basis for this indictment?

Background

The mass exodus of GDR citizens and mushrooming civil protest provoked political emergency in the summer of 1989. The GDR mass media ignored the escalating crisis but GDR citizens were able to view the unfolding events via West German television from the privacy of their homes.

Mikhail Gorbachev's arrival in Berlin on 6 October to celebrate the GDR's 40th socialist anniversary provoked an intensification of protest. The official demonstration welcoming the controversial Soviet leader was surreptitiously paired with a counter-demonstration a few blocks away. West German television cameras covering the gala celebrations discovered the 'Help us, Gorbi!' placards and the widespread police violence. The GDR exploded in mass protest after 7 October.

The citizens' accusations

Long-held secret complaints had merely come out of the closet. 'Why do we need to watch West German television to find out what's going on in our own country?' 'Why is there a sham reality in the media and a hard reality we live day after day?' 'Why do the media castigate as "dangerous and traitorous elements" those we love who have left us behind for an uncharted life in the West?'

What made professional life different for journalists in summer 1989 was the intensity of public reaction to media coverage of the youth exodus and, to be sure, their own personal reaction to the 'news they produced' and 'the reality they witnessed'. One example: rock stars, long the darlings of the Communist Youth League wrote protest letters to the League's widely read daily *Junge Welt*. According to editorial staff, the editor-in-chief personally altered the content of the letters and then sent them to print. The readers and rockers held the journalists responsible for this abuse, bringing the cultural world into painful conflict with the youthful journalists.

The state wire services staff recall their dual responsibility when covering public events — to obtain information for filing and to telephone the authorities if protest of any kind was evident. In the summer, this troublesome role came under challenge. Did they owe loyalty to the readers or to their supervisors at the agency? Indeed, this was the ultimate contradictory relationship within Leninist journalism.

Journalists' reactions

The first break with the Communist Party (SED) line occurred two days after Gorbachev's visit, when Leipzig radio reporters braved certain Berlin censure to cover live the mass 9 October Leipzig protests. The rest of the press continued to hold to the Party line for a few more days, printing Berlin fictions rather than Leipzig eye-witness accounts. Enraged residents stormed the Leipzig wire services headquarters. Caught between the fury of local opinion and the power structure in Berlin, the reporters displayed their filings to Berlin in the Leipzig bureau windows. Within a matter of days, the nationwide protest filled official media, *sans* the Berlin Party spin. On 26 October the media/SED Department of Agitation and Propaganda linkage was severed.

On 4 November the official Writers' Association sponsored an open-air dialogue to discuss the major issue of the day: media freedom. Over 500,000 GDR citizens massed on East Berlin's Alexander Square, stunning the Party leadership. The day-long event was covered live on nationwide radio and television. Reform-minded speakers from the various intellectual professions faced a sea of banners demanding freedom of the press and assembly, an end to SED monopoly of power, and a renewal of the GDR.

While support for the demonstration was widespread within the general population, not all journalists supported it openly. Journalists from the daily *Berliner Zeitung*, for example, voted not to attend the demonstration as official participants. The Berlin-based press had yet to completely sever its ties with the political parties. And, to a number of Berlin journalists, loyalty to Gorbachev's reform program still seemed to preclude throwing one's lot with the anti-Party forces on the street. Just a week later this concern was to vanish.

Few journalists actually took to the public protest microphone, but most were involved in revolutionizing their immediate professional world in their attempts to present a real picture of the events in the GDR. As they recalled, this necessitated casting off the self-censoring 'scissors in our heads'. Journalists challenged the limited scope of their professional autonomy, and insisted on an end to the editorial hierarchy typical of the Stalinist press regime.¹ Every daily newspaper editor-in-chief in the GDR was sacked, demoted or retired during November and December. Party *apparatchiks* were likewise driven out. New editors were elected by the journalists themselves, and typically came from within their own ranks.

The Party cell meetings were the site of the editorial revolt in October and November. In response to protest letters from non-Party members resentful of being excluded, the action shifted to open staff meetings. What went on in these staff meetings? Besides just trying to figure out what was happening in the political world, new desk editors were selected by secret ballot and new assignments were worked out collectively. Central to the logic driving internal reform was the journalists' insistence that they should never again bow to 'editorial oppression'. They opened the newspaper pages to citizen comment of diverse political persuasions. The journalists engaged in open dialogue with the readers through the expanded Letters pages. The editorial staff apologized to their readers, vowed to 'pursue the truth, remain independent', and to 'maintain a critical stance to those holding political power'.

In February 1990, journalists working in the former SED press sought to formalize the new editorial freedoms by developing internal governing statutes. The statutes articulated the publication's ideological orientation, such as 'socially-oriented', 'environmental', 'anti-fascist', 'socialist', 'pro-disarmament', 'independent of political parties'. Concerns shifted from hierarchy and ideological orientation to finances when editorial staff severed relationships with political parties —

the SED and the four National Front bloc parties, which also printed their organs in very limited circulation. One thorny problem was how to set up an independent publishing business. When the Round Table reform government announced that the state would no longer subsidize the press or provide convertible currency to import newsprint, the journalists worked out joint-venture agreements with West German publishing interests. The West Germans would provide capital and managerial know-how; the East Germans would control the editorial function.

The Journalist Association

The 9000-member German Journalist Association (VDJ) was a voluntary professional association rather than a union. While the VDJ leadership were SED members, the VDJ was open to all journalists regardless of party affiliation. During the summer of 1989, grassroots VDJ councils met frequently to discuss the media crisis. When the Politburo called for 'open dialogue', 'an exchange of opinions', and 'media bound to reality' on 11 October 1989, the VDJ offered to draft a media law. On 5 February 1990, the Round Table government adopted as law an expanded version of the Journalist Association recommendations.

The most comprehensive media law adopted by any of the post-Communist governments of eastern Europe did more than the obvious disentangling of party, press and state. It sought to break open the clogged public sphere, enabling the grassroots access essential to 'antipolitics'. The 'Regulation on the Protection of the Media, Freedom of Opinion, and Access to Information' declared that the mass media had an obligation to provide the public with the 'full diversity of opinion in society'. Likewise, all groups and individuals were to 'have the right to be present in the public sphere through the media'. The media were defined as 'institutions of society' requiring 'public supervision' through 'public advisory council control'. Political parties would not be participants, either directly or indirectly, in this supervisory function. Parties could express their views through Parliament. Access to information was to be guaranteed — 'all government departments, political institutions and economic enterprises have the express obligation to provide to the mass media truthful information concerning their activities'. To protect society from 'authoritarianism', senior media management must either be elected by the rank and file staff (in the printed press) or be appointed by citizen advisory groups (in broadcasting). Co-management rights of rank and file journalists would be likewise guaranteed and legally enforced. Private broadcasting was rejected out of hand — society would have no control over its content.

After years of writing the collective Party version of how social life should be, the reporters and columnists sought guarantees to safeguard their right to present their own individual opinions of how society is. Different journalists have different opinions, they said, and this array of opinions is the *sine qua non* of a democratic public sphere.

One year later: disappointment

Post-Communist GDR politics have zigzagged. Instead of some vague participatory 'third way' socialist democracy in an autonomous GDR (as envisioned by most intellectuals during the *Wende*) the former GDR is now the five new states of a united Germany, under Christian Democratic (CDU) rule. The euphoria has turned to depression, as East Germans face social chaos and hitherto unknown levels of unemployment. They complain they are residents of an 'internal banana republic', that they are second-class citizens in the reunited Germany.

the *Wende*, the newspapers were owned and controlled by political bloc parties, the east CDU. Parliament then enacted privatization laws giving worker rights to ownership of the people's property. East-West joint agreements were negotiated at all the former party dailies. In the post-revolution era, Bonn is not interested in redistributing the people's property to the east but rather, in selling it off or closing it down. The Bonn-era privatization laws cast aside those East-West joint venture agreements. The journalists forming new publishers not obligated to stay out of the newsroom.

In the heat of the revolt, a dizzying number of new publications emerged — some former East German papers, and some native-born ones. Their existence, with the advent of the new East tabloid press, turned out to be rather short-lived. One reason was simply a matter of cost — the removal of state publishing subsidies raised the price of newspapers. The typical household today can only afford one newspaper. This turned out to be, surprisingly, the former Communist Party regional paper, which provides local news and has, this past year, continued to portray the East German point of view. Indeed, the former Communist Party newspapers have gained rather than lost circulation and have attracted extensive advertising. West German publishers competed intensely with each other again this year to purchase valuable morsels of the former Communist press empire. This competition was played out within the Privatization Agency, whose staff members publicly complained that Agency ownership decisions were the result of behind-the-scenes Bonn lobbying, rather than honourable competitive bidding.

West German publishers today own the entire SED and bloc party newspapers, with the exception of the declining *Neues Deutschland*, the former newspaper of the SED Central Committee. The first newspapers to come under West German control were the fifteen bloc party dailies. When the new owners arrived, editors and journalists were replaced by professionals from West Germany. The ownership 'transference' of the former Communist press has just been completed, and the same dynamic is at work in these big dailies. All the co-management rights guaranteed under the Media Regulation no longer apply. While the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany constitution guarantees co-management rights of publishers, the so-called 'ideology business' is exempted. Only management has the right to define the ideological orientation. This *Tendenzschutz* (ideological protection) provision undermines *Wende* era journalistic autonomy, the easterners complain. To them, the fundamental problem of the SED media was this lack of autonomy of the publishers.

Broadcasting organizations broke away from SED and state control, and were replaced by advisory councils whose members were delegates from grassroots organizations and political parties. The journalists played an active role in this new relationship. But as one prominent reformer remarked, 'the last thing the media want today are independent-thinking journalists. Everything we struggled for is gone.'

Who are the new 'Lords of the Media'? German law mandates a decentralized broadcasting order. The five new eastern state parliaments have been at work since 1991 to develop new state broadcasting organizations. The East German journalists assumed that this would be an East German project. But CDU has appointed a media commissioner from Bavaria, Rudolf Mühlfenzl, whose task has been to manage the transition from a centralized East German broadcasting order to the decentralized Federal Republic model. This has also meant building a new sense of nationhood and purging GDR memory or

nostalgia from the mass media. Content is controlled by the senior editors. East German journalists have been laid off, and West German journalists have been appointed to the new positions. In every state parliament one hears elected CDU representatives openly state that members of the Socialist and the various grassroots parties should not be employed by the public broadcasting stations. The new state-level broadcasting advisory councils charged with overseeing programme content should reflect the political and social diversity. Instead, political party appointees inhabit the public advisory commissions and represent party interests. Party interests in East Germany mean, today, CDU interests.

In West Germany, political parties are not the only locus of social, political and economic power. No giant firms exist in the East to challenge the power of the parties. The CDU seems to the journalists as powerful as the old SED. During the *Wende* the journalists were able to break open the Party monopoly on information. But today, information from the government seems as difficult to get as before. In the SED era, for example, the final copy of an interview with a Party, government or enterprise leader had to be approved by the interviewee before it could be printed, reporters recall. Now the same practice has resurfaced. No review-right, no interview. No one can challenge the power of the bureaucrats and legislators today. No law guaranteeing access to public information is on the books. New media laws are in the process of being passed but none contains the public access provisions of the pre-unification Media Regulation.

Inside the newspapers today there is a tense struggle over objectivity, and what is newsworthy. The West German newspaper managers are calling for objectivity, not East German opinion in their stories. In the Communist era, objectivity meant the Party line. The journalists understand this call for objectivity as a device to remove diversity of opinion in the paper and to screen out East German identity. There is endless struggle over what should go in the paper. 'Keep politics out' is answered by 'everything here is political'. The West German managers, according to the East German journalists, do not understand the Eastern public and what it needs to know to survive in the new capitalist order. 'We're just turning into data entry clerks in computerized newsrooms.'²

A tabloid war — Murdoch vs. Maxwell and Gruner & Jahr vs. Springer — has taken an odd twist. Here the East German perspective is of interest, as East German tabloids exploit the cancerous East-West German family feud. East German gripes receive media attention — the stories are written by West German journalists, and they seek sensationalism rather than problem resolution one hears repeatedly.

When pressed, the journalists admit that at least they have more opportunity to disagree. When a politician says something outrageous, the reporter can print the statement, thereby at least introducing the offensive remark into the public sphere for possible discussion. That is new since the Communist era. But quoting once again is risky, they note. They are concerned that the functionaries of the reigning political party are on the phone to the editor-in-chief again, and with great frequency. And will the publisher, who might be on the party executive committee, decide to call the editor himself?

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1. The Communist press order is erroneously referred to as a Leninist press system. The tightly controlled media system of the USSR and Eastern Europe was established by Stalin to consolidate his political power in the late 1920s. See Brian McNair's 'Glasnost and restructuring in the Soviet media', *Media, Culture and Society*, 11(1989): 327-49.

2. The 'intellectual purge', by now a media issue in itself, has not stopped with the media. West German academics are replacing nearly the entire cadre of East German academics fired this last spring in the restructuring of the universities.