



# Window to the West: How Television from the Federal Republic Influenced Events in East Germany

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# **WINDOW TO THE WEST**

**How Television from the Federal Republic  
Influenced Events in East Germany**

**by Dieter Buhl**

Discussion Paper D-5

The Joan Shorenstein Barone Center

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**PRESS • POLITICS**



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## INTRODUCTION

Since Dieter Buhl wrote this Discussion Paper in the amazing winter/spring months of 1990 as a Fellow at the Joan Shorenstein Barone Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, history has continued to roll through his native Germany at a thunderous pace. On July 1, the currencies of East and West Germany were merged (whether the Federal Republic bought East Germany at inflated exchange rates is still an open question), and on July 16, Helmut Kohl, the likely Chancellor of a reunited Germany, and Mikhail Gorbachev, the President of a fractured Soviet Union, reached an historic agreement on the political and military horizons of the new German state. By early December, elections are almost certain to be held in both Germanies, leading to reunification. The unfinished business of World War II, namely the division of Germany in the heart of Europe, will have been done.

Buhl is one of Germany's top reporters—for the past 25 years, a specialist on European-American relations. Educated at the Free University of Berlin, he has also attended the University of Minnesota, Harvard and has lectured at Hamburg University. His doctoral dissertation examined "Science Reporting in Regional Newspapers." Since 1969, he has been the Senior Political Editor of *Die Zeit*, a mass circulation weekly.

His research here focused primarily on the way television from the Western part of Germany influenced recent political developments in the Eastern part of Germany. (Somehow the terms "West Germany" and "East Germany" already seem dated.) It is a case study of the power of technology to change politics. When the Berlin Wall still stood as a hideous reminder of the brutality of Communist rule, Ronald Reagan said: "The biggest of Big Brothers is helpless against the technology of the Information Age." There is a smug, satisfying quality to the former President's statement, but we ought to remember that the people in East Germany had access to Western news and information since the early 1970s but didn't—perhaps couldn't—move decisively against their oppressive regime until late 1989, when Gorbachev visited East Berlin and, with a few well-chosen words about the importance and inevitability of change, encouraged the revolution that no one, not even Gorbachev himself, had envisaged. The news from the West had prepared

the people of the East for radical change. But the news, while important, did not trigger the revolution; once started, it merely accelerated it.

Buhl's study suggests that television functions on at least two levels: it can educate people, and so it did for many years, one evening after another feeding information from the West into millions of East German homes; and it can have a direct influence on political events. Buhl tells about the demonstrations in Leipzig last fall, which ultimately fired the imaginations of the once-docile East Germans. "Without TV lights," Buhl writes, "these were dignified manifestations for freedom—quiet, patient, yet very powerful." Then, Monday after Monday, with metronomic regularity, the crowds kept swelling until finally they became a "story": they attracted the attention of Western cameras. "Suddenly," observes Buhl, referring to television as "an intruder," "the quiet dignity and the impressive restraint were gone." In the United States as well as in East Germany, anywhere in fact that it functions on a broad scale, television can be an 800 pound gorilla. But if, during the Leipzig demonstrations, television encouraged "extreme slogans," "nationalistic hyperbole" and "right-wing extremists," as it did, it also converted a political aspiration into a passionate nationwide demand for change, one that could no longer be postponed.

Much of Buhl's research rotates around a superb reporter's eye and feel, his sense of what happened and why. So far the scholars have not dipped into the rich material that undoubtedly exists in the closed Communist archives. There is little doubt that the old Marxist bureaucrats must have kept records on the impact of Western television on their unhappy and impatient wards. The Department of Journalism at Leipzig University is supposed to have done work on this subject, though it used to deny it. Maybe now, in the new Germany, where free inquiry will theoretically be cherished, scholarship will be able to join hands with journalism and produce a valuable study on this important theme. In the meantime, read Buhl. There's no one better.

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WINDOW TO THE WEST  
How Television from the Federal Republic  
Influenced Events in East Germany

Only a short time after a member of the East German Politburo (SED) had announced dramatic changes in travel regulations and after West German television had interpreted them on the evening news, East Berliners began to flock to the Wall. After having been denied free movement for decades, most of them were still skeptical whether, on this 9th of November, 1989, they would finally be allowed to cross the border into the other part of the city. Their doubts were confirmed when the border guards stopped them with their all too well known bureaucratic intransigence.

At Checkpoint Bornholmer Street in the meantime, thousands of people thronged impatiently. They began to shout, full of anger and impatience. "Let us go," they demanded. "We'll come back," they assured the police. The guards stood unmoved. The situation changed, however, when suddenly the lights of a Western television crew flared up. Now there was an international witness to yet another example of the arbitrariness of the East German government. The People's Police bowed to the signs of the times. It just stepped aside and people rushed through the fortified demarcation line to West Berlin. For the first time in 28 years East Berliners could go to the other part of the city that was a world most had seen only on television.

Another critical moment of the East German revolution had passed peacefully and Western television again had proved its authority. As the Communist rulers could neither eliminate nor censor the electronic media from the West, they for decades had been a beacon of truth and freedom for the East Germans. Television especially proved to be a mighty intruder for this hermetically closed society. It provided a suppressed people with reliable information about the world, it psychologically opened a small, but straight path out of the misery of socialism and it finally gave critical support to the oppositional forces that swept away the despised one party rule.

In the Eastern part of the divided Germany, tension and despair had been building for a long time. First, citizens of East Germany had asked why they had to suffer from political suppression and economic mishap while their countrymen in

West Germany enjoyed unsurpassed freedom and prosperity. Then they had watched the Soviet Union and other communist countries being changed by *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Should their state turn into the last resort of Stalinism? This became an ever more anxious question.

Isolated from the West and increasingly insulated in the East, the German Democratic Republic threatened to become the outcast of Middle Europe. Its citizens didn't find much solace in the marginal concessions of the Communist regime. Certainly, it had loosened its grip a bit on travel to the West. But those who had been allowed to visit relatives in the Federal Republic had to either be of retirement age or leave behind pawns, their children, wives, husbands. When they returned after their all-too-short acquaintance with a free society, they asked even more urgently why they at home still had to endure all the detriments of a repressive system.

Freedom of information in particular had been even more curtailed during recent years. The government had always tightly controlled the press. East German papers had to write along strict Party lines and Western publications were not allowed into East Germany. The vast majority of East Berliners, for instance, had never seen one of the papers which were produced only a few miles away on the other side of the Wall in West Berlin. But, fearing the danger of infection of *glasnost*, the Honecker government turned the screw still tighter. It even prohibited the import of some Soviet papers, which contained critical articles about Stalinism.

In this increasingly absurd and frustrating situation, the East Germans more than ever used a unique advantage. Unlike other peoples under communist rule, they shared the same language, the same cultural and historical background with the citizens of a neighboring country in the West. This gave them the chance to utilize the electronic media of that country, the Federal Republic. And so they did, without any qualifications. For as successful as the East German government had been in building a concrete wall, an electronic wall it could not build.

Thus, all East Germans could receive at least

half a dozen Western networks. Their ratings by far surpassed those of the East German stations, especially RIAS, an American-controlled network in West Berlin, which enjoyed, by far, more listeners in the East than in the West.

This penetration by radio from the West distinguished East Germany from all other communist countries. None of them was as exposed to Western broadcasts in a widely understood language. In North Korea or the People's Republic of China, states that exist in a divided nation, the situation is markedly different. In North Korea radio sets are exclusively programmed for government stations, and Taiwan has to cover distances too long to reach Mainland China comprehensively with its airwaves.

Due to the special geographic and geopolitical conditions, the citizens of East Germany therefore experienced a certain kind of *glasnost* long before this notion became known worldwide as a synonym for more transparency. This privilege of its people, of course, created difficult problems for the regime.

### Control of the Airwaves

Since Communist parties sprang up at the beginning of this century, in every revolutionary situation the control of information had been one of their most important maxims. In former times that meant taking possession of the printing presses. Later the supervision of airwaves became an even more powerful urge of the Communists.

East German rulers, however, just could not follow that traditional advice. They did own nearly all the printing facilities as well as all radio and television stations in their country, but they did not have any weapon against the electronic invasion from the West. And if Western radio was dangerous, Western television posed even greater threats for them.

The East Berlin government, therefore, had reason enough to be alarmed. In 1989, 95% of all East German households owned a TV set (half of them color); most of them were also able to receive broadcasts from the West, and they even saw them in color. For though all Eastern European countries use the French Secam system, with the help of (costly) transformers East Germans could receive West German TV using the PAL system, in color.

West German television reached 80-85% of the East German area. Western broadcasts could now reach all East Germans with the exception of those living in the valley of the River Elbe around Dresden and in the northern edge of the country around the city of Greifswald.

Because of this disadvantage, those regions were not very popular among East Germans. If they had to change jobs or their place of residence, they usually tried to avoid "the valley of the unsuspecting" (Dresden) or the Greifswald area. Cable television, in the meantime, promised to change that condition. According to a report in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, by 1984 more than 2.3 million of the 11 million households in East Germany were connected to cable television. And East Berlin, giving in to the impatient demand of its people, even had fed the most important West German public TV channels—ARD and ZDF—into its cable system.

Then there was television by satellite. Though they cost around 25,000 East Marks, far more than the average yearly income, many East Germans bought parabolic antennas. With them they could receive nearly all West German private television stations—among them Eins Plus, Sat 1, RTL Plus—though not ARD and ZDF.

This penetration by West German electronic media had always given a headache to the East German authorities. Rulers in Moscow, for example, were able to jam Western stations like the Voice of America or Radio Free Europe, but officials in Berlin had never been able to cut off the electronic intrusion from neighboring West Germany.

As authorities had no technical means to lock out Western thoughts, they tried ideological ones. "The enemy of the people stands on the roof," complained Walter Ulbricht, East Germany's strong man until 1971. At the height of the Cold War the regime began to eliminate the temptation by violent means. Fighting brigades of the Communist Free German Youth (FDJ) climbed the roofs and cut down the antennas, but there were just too many of them pointed to the West to be destroyed. Therefore, the West Berlin "Tagesspiegel" could declare rightly: "The SED can determine what may be printed and broadcast within the GDR, but in their own living-room people allow the class enemy to take the floor."

Attempts to fight the electronic adversary on East German airwaves backfired as well. The broadcast of the notorious agitator Karl-Edward von Schnitzler, for instance, had no impact on the East Germans. His "black channel" show in which he commented on manipulated segments of West German television drew extremely low ratings.

At the ninth plenum of the Central Committee in 1973, Erich Honecker for the first time had openly admitted the influence of "Western mass

media, especially radio and television of the Federal Republic, which here everybody can switch on and off as he likes." As the East German government could not prevent the people from watching West German TV, it gradually gave in. Still, papers like the East Berlin "Elternhaus und Schule" ("Parents' House and School") as recently as 1983 tried to warn parents about the dangers of bad moral influence for their children and demanded that "parents, by their own discipline in using mass media, set an example for their children."

One can imagine how the regime suffered from the fact that the East Germans had unimpeded access to Western television. Not only could the people act as a truth squad, challenging everything that was said and done by the Communist regime, it opened the window to Western societies. The people of the first "Workers and Peasants State on German soil," as the regime proudly called itself, had an undiluted and unfiltered view of the Western way of life. They were able to compare, and what they found out certainly did not speak for their system.

West German television provided them with authentic information about how people in the West lived and worked, how they loved and quarreled, how they enjoyed and suffered. On their screens they could watch the image of a society which was completely different from their own, free and prosperous.

The impact of the signals from the West is as yet unmeasured. The effects of Western television undoubtedly have been investigated by East German institutions. The Department of Journalism at Leipzig University, which is suspected of having done such research, denies any involvement.

The director of the Institute for International Policy and Economy (Institut fuer Internationale Politik und Wirtschaft der DDR), Professor Max Schmid, has reported that many years ago his institute had watched West German media and its coverage of East Germany, but long before the fall of the Wall, maintains Schmid, they had come to the conclusion that their way of looking at the problem was wrong. Therefore, he claims, they had stopped working on this project.

In West Germany, the most comprehensive investigation up to now was done by Kurt R. Hesse of the University of Bamberg, published in the book, *West Media in the GDR: Utilization, Image and Effects of West German Radio and Television*. Between August 6 and 16, 1985, he interviewed 205 emigres from East Germany in the refugee camp of Giessen, West Germany. Despite the small, select nature of his sample group,

Hesse's research did bring to light the first deeper insight to East German television habits and the attitude people had towards West German TV.

Hesse's most important findings reveal the extent to which the East Germans used West German television. Eighty-two percent of them watched it regularly, 17% often or occasionally, and only 1% seldom. (Other poll results prove that the reception of West German radio was even more extensive, especially in those regions where Western TV could not be received; nearly two-thirds of those polled listened only to Western radio and never tuned in to East German stations.) The ratings for East German TV correspondingly turned out to be very low: just 10% tuned in the state television channel often or daily, 18% occasionally, 72% very seldom or never. Only in areas not reached by Western TV were the ratings up for Eastern television; there, 49%, 28%, 23%, respectively, watched it.

### Quality of Broadcasting

West German television was without a doubt a most important source of information—and entertainment. A major reason, one suspects, may have been the drabness of East German broadcasting, which rarely provided entertaining programs. As all other mass media, it was subordinated to the Department of Agitation of the Politburo. Freedom of the press was indeed granted under Article 27(2) of the Constitution, but only in a Communist sense. "The socialist press may not be free in the sense that it disorients the socialist conscience," it said in a commentary of the Constitution.

Television had to be a tool of the Party and it proved to be a clumsy one. As Lenin had demanded of the Party papers in 1901, East German television tried to be "collective propagandist," "collective agitator," and "collective organizer." It did it with embarrassing results. East German network news in particular never came close to fulfilling its mission. It was ordered in its statute to convince the audience "of the law of victorious socialism and the process of demarcation between the socialist German national state and the imperialist state, FRG." But the many horror pictures of the Federal Republic transmitted from the headquarters of East German TV in Adlershof only miles away from the center of West Berlin missed their goal.

Not only did the people not trust the news coming out of Adlershof, they were bored by it. Minutes-long recitations of the names and titles of visiting foreign delegations or the usual reports

about yet another record harvest or a workers' hero kept the ratings at low ebb. "They treated us like children," observed Goeran Hajek, social psychologist at Leipzig University, "working by the motto: tomorrow we will tell you another fairy tale."

Author Stephan Heym strikingly described the shortcomings of East German TV. In a self-trial, he had stayed away from West German newscasts and for four weeks only watched the East German "Aktuelle Kamera" (AK). His results corresponded with the impressions of the great majority of his countrymen: "You can do autogenous training also in a more direct way," he stated. "My right arm starts sleeping, my left (arm) starts sleeping, I begin to sleep."

The East German station's underdeveloped appeal was also proved by the media expert and former East German Franz Coeser. Though it was placed between ZDF news (7:00 p.m.) and ARD news (8:00 p.m.), AK just did not draw much attention. "When it begins at 7:30 p.m.," Coeser claimed several years ago, "it has a rating of 3%, at 7:31 the rating is down to 0.2%."

There may be doubts about the scientific basis of this assertion, but there can be no doubt that the East German television never fulfilled its fundamental task, defined at its founding. Heinz Adamek, for many years chairman of the State Commission on TV, had hope at the beginning for "the power of the creation of TV to shape the mental development of man." It never worked out. Party-controlled media, East German television proved again and again, just cannot win the interest and imagination of people, much less their hearts. In the end, Eastern television became a laughing stock. "East German television," mocked West Berlin filmmaker Harun Farock, "becomes ever more similar to a pupil's presentation of West German TV."

This comment should not be understood as a wholehearted endorsement of television in the Federal Republic. The several private stations and the two main public channels have their own shortcomings. ARD and ZDF are publicly controlled systems. West German political parties try to have as much influence as possible on the program and on personal structure. This occasionally leads to broadcasts that are either too biased or too balanced. Granted existence by state treaties and regulated audience fees are additional reasons for a certain lack of flexibility and for complacency of the public networks.

For viewers in the East, however, West German television provided unrivaled information and distraction. To switch on a Western channel

meant to switch off the socialist reality, to take refuge from gloomy every-day life. They preferred everything they saw on the screen, from commercials for Cornflakes or Volkswagens to Western showmasters or newscasters, to what they experienced in their own environment.

"It increased fascination with the Western world," observes social psychologist Hajek. "If East Germans saw anything on their television that satisfied them, they used to praise it by judging it 'nearly as good as in the West.'"

Kurt R. Hesse, with the help of his poll, tried to find out what attracted East Germans most to Western channels. Pluralism and openness of the program ranked first (56%). Other attractions the East German audience found in programs beamed from across the border were: quality of single broadcast (42%), variety (20%), quality of information (80%), and relaxed presentation (40%).

In the eyes of East German viewers, all other advantages of Western TV were surpassed by its credibility. Eighty percent judged it more or much more credible than East Berlin's state television. This helped Western TV news to become the outstanding source of information. The main news programs, *Tagesschau* (ARD) and *Heute* (ZDF), enjoyed much higher relative ratings in the East than in the West. Sixty-five percent of the East German TV audience watched *Tagesschau* regularly, as Hesse found out, and 35% occasionally; the ratings for *Heute* were 46% and 43%, respectively.

The East German propaganda condemned the attractiveness of Western newscasts as "electronic imperialism." The people in the Workers and Peasants State, however, cherished the authenticity and honesty of West German television news. As Antony John Goss points out in his book, *Pictures of Germany in Television*, they trusted Western news four times as much as the news programs provided by Eastern TV. West Germans, in reference to contradictory news items, consider TV as a much more trustworthy informant (69%) than radio (30%) and newspapers (11%). It can be suspected that the often betrayed East Germans relied even more heavily on news (from the West) which they could see with their own eyes.

As dangerous as the rulers considered the news from the West, they were not much less frightened by entertainment offered on Western channels. Shows and movies turned out to be an important vehicle for Western ideology. They demonstrated how free people think and act, how freely they can talk and travel, and what a high standard of living they enjoy.

There has been only limited research as yet on the reception of Western entertainment. Hesse, in his studies, concentrated on two of the most popular series. He found out that 40% of the East German women polled and 21% of the men watched *Dallas* regularly; *Dynasty* each week attracted 37% of the female viewers, 18% of the males. As Dr. Shepard Stone, former director of the Berlin Aspen Institute and an experienced witness of East German developments, observed there were especially two reasons for the widespread fascination: "East German women were just overwhelmed by the elegant dresses worn in these series, and the men loved the wonderful cars being driven around Dallas and Denver."

It was these series that caused a deep split among the TV audience. At least as many viewers as were fascinated by the American family sagas despised them. The ruling party in particular condemned these modern fairy tales as "soft agitation." "But they are somehow made so well," admitted an East German functionary, "that you can watch them, even if you know the reason for these undertakings."

To Western newscasts the regime did not react so permissively; however, there was not much they could do about them. After many years of indoctrination, the desire of the people for truth was burning too brightly to be extinguished. The East German authorities were only left with the hope that Aldous Huxley's *Soma* effect might work, that finally all of the positive influx from the West would lead to assist in stabilizing, paralyzing satisfaction. But as the East German revolution proved, even this last hope turned out to be an illusion.

### Political Credibility

News is power. Coming from the West it permanently undermined the already minute credibility of the governing Party. It counterbalanced the constant attempts of disinformation. It helped people to decode the propaganda in the official Party papers. And in many cases it contradicted the gloomy picture East German TV painted of the Federal Republic. This "truth squad" effect was multiplied by communication at the working place and in private circles, for West German newscasts always provided the people in East Germany with one of their most popular topics of conversation.

The attempts of the East German leadership to defuse explosive news items from the West occasionally led to a special kind of shadow boxing. Thus, the Communist central organ, *Neues Deutschland*, tried to refute Western television

reports without mentioning them. Readers of the paper, who had not watched West German TV the evening before, wondered why it published certain stories that seemed to come out of the blue.

The best effect analysis to date, though not very systematic, has been by West German journalists who worked in East Germany. Fritz Pleitgen, former ARD correspondent in East Berlin, gave a typical example: "If Honecker made a long speech about foreign policy, people would register it only after Western news reported about it." Sometimes reports in West German television even created hysteria on the other side of the border. When *Tagesschau* announced an imminent, dramatic change of the Intershop system, where East Germans could buy rare Western goods with valuta, long lines appeared in front of the stores the next morning. People were afraid that they would not be able to use their precious hard currency any more.

An especially striking example of its influence and credibility was made when West German TV did a very positive review on the East German movie "Solo Sunny." Its box office, it turned out, was much better in regions where Western television could be received than in those where it could not.

Western correspondents, however, never had an easy task in East Germany. Until 1971 they were hardly allowed into the country. Only for special occasions, such as political events in East Berlin or the Leipzig Trade Fair, could they get license to shoot.

A change for the better occurred when, in December 1972, both German states signed the "Basic Treaty" which established new relations between them. West German correspondents were allowed to become accredited in East Berlin and were granted some freedom of reporting. It turned out to be limited. Only one year later, new regulations warned against any defamation of the government and granted indoor shooting or interviews with "leading personalities" only with special permission. Many correspondents fell into the traps of these regulations and were expelled from East Germany. Among them was ARD correspondent Lothar Loewe, who became a cause célèbre; he was thrown out of the country after he had claimed in a commentary that everybody in the GDR knew "that the border troops have strict orders to shoot people like hares."

West German journalists were watched by security forces and had to endure an official observer at their side when they traveled, but they experienced a lot of satisfaction as well. The



government provoked so many contradictions that correspondents could correct with great impact. They interpreted travel regulations, which East Berlin purposely kept blurry, or they reported about important church meetings, which East German television nearly always neglected completely.

Because of their important function, Western TV journalists were not only well known throughout the German Democratic Republic, they were celebrated wherever they appeared. Because of their influence and their reputation, those correspondents also played a decisive part in the East German revolution.

When exactly the revolution started only history will tell. There is no doubt, however, that West German cameras accompanied it. Ronald Reagan, who himself had always used communications so well, was particularly on target in the case of the East German upheaval when he said: "The biggest of Big Brothers is helpless against the technology of the Information Age."

It was, for instance, the technology of the most powerful loudspeakers that demonstrated the helplessness of the Communist regime. When on Whit Sunday of 1987 there was a giant pop festival in West Berlin near the border, the sounds of rock music roared far into the other part of the city. Hundreds of East Berlin youths crowded at their side of the Wall to enjoy the music from a world out of their reach. West German camera crews were there to capture this unique gathering and the enthusiasm of the young people. The scene turned ugly, however, when East German secret police began to harass the Western journalists and, accompanied by the crowd shouting "the Wall must go," smashed the equipment of TV crews.

This spontaneous audience near the Brandenburg Gate set an early example of courage of East Germans in the face of an almighty and omnipresent police state. Many were to follow, and often Western TV was there to record them. For East Germans it not only demanded a lot of courage to protest in full public, it was also the only way to alarm the world and, via West German television, shake up their own countrymen.

So by the end of 1988 more and more citizens of East Germany stood up in front of Western cameras to express their anger and contempt for the Communist regime. "People hoped to be protected by the cameras," explained ZDF correspondent Michael Schmitz, "and they therefore tried to protect the reporters." Quite often, though, the mutual protection didn't work. Not only were the demonstrators beaten up, but the reporters as well; Michael Schmitz, for instance, recounts

that he experienced first-hand the brutality of the state security (Stasi) many times.

As in the Soviet Union and Poland, intimidation of the media did not help the East German government. More and more East Germans who just could not bear the arbitrariness of the regime either cried out their despair or, by fleeing into Western embassies, tried to find an escape route out of the socialist state. Many times West German television was there to record the protest. Television then became an ever more important force in East German politics. The functionaries of the ruling party tried to calm the people down and promise them change. They warned against instability, a notion intended to frighten the people who had been led by the nose for so many years. But watching West German news each evening, the East Germans could register how many of their countrymen felt about the official promises and warnings.

### **Television and Unification**

Since the Wall was built in August of 1961, there had always been a great desire for escape from the East. Even though a growing number of East Germans had been allowed to leave the country legally in recent years, there remained many still who didn't want to wait for the official permit, which could take years to get. They therefore tried to escape, though even in the age of the new detente this could mean death. As late as spring of 1989, people were killed while trying to flee across the inner German border. On February 26, a 20-year-old locksmith was shot by border guards; only four weeks later a 32-year-old man fell to death while trying to escape when his self-made balloon failed.

Television could not cover tragic events like these, for they happened without warning. It was present, however, when the countdown finally began for the collapse of the Communist rule. The counting started in the early days of August 1989, when Hungary hesitatingly perforated the Iron Curtain which had separated East and West for over four decades. East Germans, for whom Hungary had been one of the few foreign countries where they could spend their holidays, used their chance. Initially Hungarian border guards tried to prevent them from fleeing, but Western television covered the border and interviewed those who successfully crossed it, asking them about the risks and the best escape route. The East Germans, who still were imprisoned in their country, were able to watch all this on West German television. If they were mobile and courageous enough, they followed suit.

Thus, the Exodus from East Germany began. A vote by feet occurred that, in the end, set the stage for the unification of Germany.

By becoming an ever more important pulpit for dissidents and by massively supporting the escape from East Germany, West German television (and to some degree radio) permanently increased the pressure on the East German rulers. The electronic needle again and again punctured the seemingly safe armor of the regime.

East Germans were also, through television, witnesses to the most open humiliation of the Communist system. While the regime celebrated its 40th anniversary with parades and pompous speeches, Western cameras captured the less festive mood of the people. Though police tried with brutal force to prevent television from shooting, the cameras nevertheless were able to record the mass manifestations of dissidents that took place in East Berlin while, at the same time, government officials were acting like the orchestra on the Titanic.

From then on, East Germans were able to observe in their own living rooms how dramatically their oppressors were losing their power. West German, not East German, television daily offered them an insight into the historic process that at the end swept the old guard from power.

For the first time, therefore—though it only became apparent later—the public media of West Germany came closer to fulfilling its own political mandate. The treaty between the public broadcast system North German Radio (NDR) and its three supporting states, for instance, says, “The programs of the NDR shall . . . stand up for the unity of Germany in peace and freedom.” The treaty requires that programs “shall serve the reunification of Germany in peace and freedom and the understanding between the people.” In this connection it demands from TV the willingness and ability “to convey a picture of German reality.”

But which picture of the Federal Republic did West German television offer the viewers on the other side of the border? It certainly did not present a country without faults. As products of a pluralistic society which automatically keeps its distance towards state and government, the stations painted very contradictory images of West Germany. “For the buildup of cumulative knowledge and secured understanding of political contacts” it is not suited, judged media expert Winfried Schulz. This is especially convincing, because East Germans were not able to complement news from a free TV system by deepening information from a free press. “The world outside of our reach” that Walter Lippman described in

*Public Opinion*—“we shall assume that what each man does is based not on direct and certain knowledge, but on pictures made by himself or given to him”—therefore had a special meaning for television audiences in East Germany.

If East Germans watched both East and West German TV, they were exposed to two completely opposite pictures of the world, and especially of the two Germanies. In its newscasts and news magazines, Eastern television offered an East Germany without deficiencies. It used the darker colors to portray West Germany. At the average, 10% of the news was dedicated to unemployment, housing problems or the crime rate in West Germany.

Only after the borders were opened were most East Germans able to acquire direct knowledge of the West. Though they had been exposed to much insight by Western media, there still were surprises. “The most striking impression,” recalls Goeran Hajek, “was how colorful and orderly this country is.”

Contrary to the agitators at Adlershof, ARD and ZDF used only 1.5% of their newscast to report on the other Germany. This, among others, was one of the reasons why West Germans knew relatively little about East Germany. “For a long time,” states Volker Herres in his book *Kennzeichen D*, “people in the Federal Republic knew more about Belgium or Great Britain than about the GDR.”

Though they were exposed to comprehensive indoctrination by their media, East Germans developed their own ideas about the country on the other side of the barbed wire. When the wave of refugees gushed into the West, East Germans could watch on their screens how warmly and generously those who had left everything behind them were received by their kin in the Federal Republic.

There were also complaints about the heavy-handedness of the pictures of people fleeing to freedom. Fritz Pleitgen, editor-in-chief of West German Radio (WDR), reported: “Young members of the (East German) opposition are sick and tired of the emotional approach of West German television. They don’t want any more of their countrymen being shown while they climb the fence of the West German embassy in Prague.” “That hurts our dignity,” Pleitgen quoted them.

But the vast majority of East Germans were elated by what they watched. They knew that they finally could leave their country without permission by an arbitrary bureaucracy, and that freed them of their fear. Already in early summer of 1989, members of the new and, for the first time, organized opposition had appeared to East Germans on West German television, for the

Communists, not astonishingly, concealed them from the public. During the summer, Western TV more and more became the stage for opponents of the East German regime. With electronic help, the dissidents could present their deep resentment and criticism of Honecker's misrule and could air their own political conceptions.

These presentations were instrumental in bringing the people to the streets in many East German cities. Machiavelli, who has provided so much insight into the psychology of the political process, proved only half right in this case. "The reformer," he had once claimed, "has enemies in all those who profit from the old order and only lukewarm supporters in those who profit from the new order." Those demonstrators who demanded immediate reforms were not lukewarm; they marched in the face of large contingents of police and militia—and (at least at the beginning) without the protection of West German TV.

As Western correspondents at this time (late September and early October) were not allowed to cover the demonstrations, there were only amateur cameramen, if anyone, recording them. Verbal news about the manifestations in Western media, however, proved sufficient enough to help provoke an avalanche of protests all over East Germany.

The absence of Western TV, in some cases at least, was also very important. It prevented the phenomenon that is known from many demonstrations in Western democracies: as soon as television lights flare up, people behave differently. Being in the limelight in many cases not only leads them to become more courageous and outspoken, but to act more artificially and even aggressively. They do things for the cameras that they would never do without them. Besides that, television—willingly or unwillingly—tends to forge the image of demonstrations, because as an optical instrument it is attracted by symbols and actions.

The events in the city of Leipzig set a vivid example for this phenomenon. In this second largest East German city, from very early on, services in the Nikolai Church had been a catalyst for the movement for peace and freedom. During the entire summer of 1989, dissidents had congregated there to demand reforms of the Peasants and Workers State. More and more people joined the services and started to assemble in the streets afterwards.

Leipzig finally became known as the hotbed ("city of heroes," as one poet called it) of East German revolution. When on October 9 some 70,000

people took to the streets, they were surrounded by heavily armed police and militia. But because of the appeasing intervention of Kurt Masur, conductor of Leipzig's world famous Gewandhaus Orchestra, and five other leading citizens, people were able to demonstrate peacefully, and a blood-bath was prevented.

No television was at hand when this happened. Nor was it present during the following two or three Monday rallies. Without TV lights, these were dignified manifestations for freedom—quiet, patient, yet very powerful. For two hours the people of Leipzig marched around their inner city, through darkness and devastating smog. It turned out that by their sheer presence and their fighting slogan, "We are the people," the Leipzigers did more than any other East Germans to topple their regime.

Then television appeared. First it could only secretly take shots of the revolting masses. Later, with the state authorities losing control, it was able to cover openly and the rallies changed for the worse. Television in Leipzig acted as an intruder, for suddenly the quiet dignity and the impressive restraint were gone. The Monday demonstrations became a TV event with extreme slogans, with nationalistic hyperbole, and finally even with right-wing extremists from West Germany using the scene for their repulsive purposes.

## Conclusion

The best surveys of the dramatic events during the fall and winter of 1989 for East Germans were given by West German television. Its correspondents in East Germany used the accelerating breakdown of authority to neglect the impending working rules and roam the country. Especially revealing were the interviews with members of the formerly powerful Communist elite. For the first time, East Germans could watch their oppressors being interviewed thoroughly and aggressively by Western journalists, which confirmed the ignorance and mediocrity they had always suspected existed at the top. Even the East Berlin state-controlled TV began to shake off some of its chains and to turn from ideology to reality.

Since then, the speedy process of rapprochement between the two German states has also promoted cooperation between television on both sides of the border. Joint German TV productions are envisaged, and even West German commercials on East German television are anticipated. With the hard currency earned by the commercials, officials in Adlershof calculate, they will be

able to buy additional Western TV production.

As East German television adjusts to its new freedom, it may, as long as it survives, become more interesting for the audience in the West. In 1988, only 10% of those people in the Federal Republic who could receive East German television used this opportunity. Livelier, less ideologically impregnated programs already attract more and more of the 10 million potential West German viewers in the East German transmission range, as the company for consumption research in Nuernberg found out.

The impact of West German television on public opinion and behavior in East Germany, however, will remain a subject of research for many years to come. With empirical investigation now possible, it may yield many new and astonishing findings.

One outcome at least can be anticipated now already. It would not be surprising if in this connection Sigmund Freud's list of the three impossible professions—government, education, psychoanalysis—"in which you can be sure from the beginning to only reach unsatisfactory results," would have to be expanded to include TV journalism. For though West German TV for many years helped the East Germans with vital information and occasionally vitalizing entertainment, it could teach them only marginally how to live in a free society and how to cope with the challenges of a democracy. Television can deliver images, it may be proved again soon, but it cannot replace experience.

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