Public Sphere in the German Democratic Republic
A Theoretical and Empirical Contribution to the Structures of Communication in Societies with no Freedom of the Press

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1. Scope

Using the example of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) the present study deals with the public sphere in Eastern European countries before 1989. For this purpose, it moves the daily newspapers back on stage. This approach may at first seem somewhat controversial. Western studies continue to uphold the thesis that the mass media in socialist societies could not reflect public opinion, but solely to mould and shape it in the direction favoured by the leading party (Bathrick, 1995; Silbermann, 1997). Consequently, in this view the socialist mass media – by completely choking public opinion – just served as a propaganda tool for the socialist elite, making the media more or less “dispensable” to its public (Habermas, 1989; Boggs, 2000). The idea of the media as “collective propagandist, agitator and organiser” (Lenin) makes it plain why the bulk of research about the public sphere in the GDR focuses on literature and culture, on opposition groups and on the Church and leaves out “the official public sphere under party control” (Silberman, 1997, p. 7).

The present paper supports the idea that the dichotomy between the propaganda role of the state’s media infrastructure on the one hand and the partially free sphere in the fields of literature and arts on the other hand actually limit the scope of research and make it impossible to see the structures of public communication. Even though a quick look into the thin, slowly decaying newspapers with pictures of the General-Secretary of the GDR, political session reports and mottoes is enough to convince of the totalitarian destruction of the public sphere in societies ruled by State socialism, two questions remain unanswered, namely: How could the communist party stay in power without many incidents over such a long period of time? And where did the protest movement come from that destroyed this solid system almost in a blink of an eye?

In both cases, the answer of the present study leads to the steering of the mass media which was in fact a trial to control the public sphere at all (even the arts, encounters and the media from the West). The political staged public sphere did not provide an intermediary system for debate that would have allowed for bilateral exchange between politics and society and given free access to everyone (Gerhards & Neidhardt, 1990, pp. 42-46). Yet, even in the GDR there was a “domain that was not secret” and that related to State affairs (which is the original definition of the concept of public sphere). As public communication took place via daily papers “within the horizon of all citizens” (a relevant specificity of the public sphere in the State system) and as readers were largely aware of both the ob-
jectives and the mechanisms of political steering of the media that was going on, public opinion could emerge in the GDR and represent more or less general positions with regard to specific issues. These opinions could not really touch upon all issues, but did not necessarily have to be in agreement with the objectives of the communication policy. By comparison the media offers from the West towards the GDR have influenced the process of public opinion making in less concrete ways (because Western Television could only dedicate a comparatively limited amount of air-time to GDR issues) but they have largely contributed to raising the awareness of the audience to the phenomenon of media steering that was going on in the GDR.

2. Theoretical background and sources

On the basis both of the Arena Model by Gerhards and Neidhardt (1990) and the findings of historical research about the GDR, the paper differentiates the public sphere in socialist countries. Alongside the two sub-levels of mass communication in socialist countries (the politically staged public sphere and the media from the West), official and unofficial events and meetings as well as encounters (such as dialogues on the bus, at the workplace or at the pub) there was a fourth level: internal public spheres like readers’ letters or party meetings which were open to GDR citizens and gatekeepers to the other levels of public sphere, but not to journalists and other observers from the West. The study is based on four main sources: files from the Federal archives in Berlin, a content analyses of the daily instructions given by the media headquarter of the communist party, a (quantitative and qualitative) content analyses of four main GDR newspapers, and a series of about 100 biographical interviews, held between 2000 and 2002, in which former GDR-residents have been asked about their everyday media usage during the 1980s.

3. Main findings

The “positive connotation” of the concept of public sphere has restrained the research into the performance of the politically staged public discourse in the States of Eastern Europe as well as into internal public spheres hidden from Western eyes. If researchers had not concentrated on a counter public sphere or if they had not denied the existence of a public sphere, the mobilisation process of the public sphere that took place in the GDR in 1989 would not have taken us so much by surprise (Gerhards & Neidhardt, 1990, p. 77).

The SED leadership saw the press as an instrument in the class struggle and positioned a fiction in the part of the public sphere that it could control directly. This fiction was meant to serve their current interests and did take into account that the Western media also played a role in the GDR public communication sphere. People in charge have consistently implied that “the other side” (in particular West Germany) was on the lookout for weaknesses of the GDR in all its publications. That’s why they made every effort to suppress the reporting of any internal details that their adversary might have used for their own interest. The
most important stakeholders (politicians, ambassadors, businessmen and artists, who had to deal with the GDR) as well as the GDR citizens used to read the East German press as it was conceived (namely as an official statement of the SED) and tried to draw conclusions about the position and the objectives of the GDR leadership. The media fiction may have caused large numbers of readers to leave out the first pages of the dailies, but on the other hand politically interested citizens had the possibility to draw conclusions not only about the objectives and the position of the SED leadership but also about the positioning of the class enemy, on internal and external conflict zones and economic issues. Even though the politically staged public sphere was neither open to all topics, nor for all actors, it did in a way at least provide a certain measure of transparency and orientation. The citizens of the GDR knew that there was no free public sphere in their country and they have therefore generally distrusted news and the media, even the media offer from West Germany. The politically staged public sphere did also fulfill an orientation function, because it informed about the currently valid reading of the ideology, about what one could do and say in events, meetings or encounters without rubbing the system up the wrong way.

The knowledge that the papers had a high significance for the communist party and that there were close ties between the newsrooms and the decision makers had the consequence that the GDR citizens turned to the press and even to the Secretary for Agitation in the Central Committee, not because they believed that their cases would be published, but because they knew that their letters would get to the relevant administration (in case of specific problems) or to the centre of power. The daily newspapers in the GDR represented a channel for discussion that provided an intermediary between the politics and the population (internal public spheres).

The dominance of the mass media has allowed for the emergence of an unofficial communication structure that has provided (within limitations) opportunities to connect society (or the real world) with politics. The collected readers’ letters and the files of the section for agitation demonstrate that this discourse can be gauged with the norms of Habermas (1989), largely because the involved citizens had no means to know how the rulers would react and needed not only courage but as well rhetorical capacities in support of their argument. It must be said that the wave of protest that caused the end of the Communists’ rule was also boosted by the fact that reality and media fictions were ever growing further apart. It can nevertheless be safely assumed that the GDR citizens had plenty of opportunities to read signs of the agony of the System in the politically staged public sphere. Since validation could only happen within encounters, the process of build up of political will has taken longer than it does in societies with an autonomous system of public sphere.
Literature


