

## CONNECTED ENEMIES?

### PROGRAMMING TRANSFER BETWEEN EAST AND WEST DURING THE COLD WAR AND THE EXAMPLE OF EAST GERMAN TELEVISION

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**Abstract:** The article analyzes the international transfer of television programming during the Cold War as exemplified by East German television. The study focuses on the structures of imports of foreign content and on the feedback processes in cultural policy during the continuation of such imports. The article examines the hypothesis that programming transfer as practiced by East German television can be described as a shifting of the institution between disparate logics of politics and cultural policy and intrinsic dynamics of the medium.

**Keywords:** East Germany, Programming transfer, OIRT, Intervision, Cold War, Television

#### 1. Introduction: A Bridge over Troubled Water

In the post-1945 phase of the Cold War, the mass media took on a special role as ambassadors and propaganda instruments. Under these conditions, foreign influence or intentional exchange seemed to be neither desirable nor possible.

However, a more discriminating look at international programming transfer shows that the interrelations between the rival camps expanded continually after the arrival of television in the 1950s, and that the relations between the media institutions in different countries never broke off even at high points of East-West confrontation. They were 'allied enemies'. In the present article we will pursue this observation along the important milestones in the history of international media relations. The focus is on the example of East Germany, which was situated at the interface between the Eastern and Western blocs, and was particularly exposed to the influences of both camps due to its cultural roots, and on the 1970s, when a distinct increase in international transfer efforts can be observed in conjunction with the international recognition of the GDR.

In order to approach and restrict the complex object of investigation, the analysis is concentrated on the following central questions:

What structures influenced programming transfer in East German television?

What historic phases were there in the development of international programming transfer?

What processes of feedback into East German politics, economics and cultural policy can be discerned as programming imports continued?

The article examines the hypothesis that programming transfer as practiced by East German television can be described as a shifting of the institution between disparate logics of politics and cultural policy and intrinsic dynamics of the medium.

This hypothesis is based in part on the finding that extensive cooperation developed and continued between the socialist and capitalist blocs in spite of the political reality of East-West confrontation. In addition to the steadily increasing volume of programming transfer, with its implications for the economy and the domestic and foreign policy of the countries concerned, the interdependencies between national TV cultures are particularly important in this connection.

We begin with a discussion of theoretical and conceptual foundations, focusing first on the prior research, before analyzing the example of East German television in depth.

## 2. Prior Research

Research in history and media studies to date has largely neglected the East-West media discourse. This is true of degree theses at East German universities, which reflected a one-sided fixation on cooperation with the USSR;<sup>1</sup> the numerous works on the historic development of Western television; and the separate portrayals of East German television.<sup>2</sup> Up to the collapse of the East German state, even the latter gave only marginal attention to international issues and contributed only rudimentary information.<sup>3</sup> The only substantial prior work on our topic is Ernest Eugster's 1983 publication, *Television Programming Across National Boundaries: The EBU and OIRT Experience*.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the few studies that included all of Europe or the broadcasters' umbrella association, the Organisation internationale de radiodiffusion et de télévision (OIRT), and dealt to some extent with East-West communication, were unable to respond to later processes due to their early periods of investigation and publication dates.

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Dagmar Richter, *Der zielgerichtete Einsatz von Programmen aus den sozialistischen Partnerländern* [The purposeful use of programs from Socialist partner countries], *Diplom* thesis, Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen, Babelsberg 1972; Monika Nakath, *Zu ausgewählten Fragen der Zusammenarbeit zwischen dem Fernsehen der DDR und dem Zentralen Sowjetischen Fernsehen in den Jahren 1964 bis 1970* [On selected issues in the cooperation between GDR state television and Soviet Central Television from 1964 to 1970], Dissertation A, Humboldt-Universität, Berlin, GDR, 1979; Brigitte Wauer, *Die Zusammenarbeit zwischen dem Fernsehen der DDR und dem Zentralen sowjetischen Fernsehen in den Jahren 1971–1980: Ausgewählte Probleme* [Cooperation between East German state television and Soviet Central Television from 1971 to 1980: selected problems], Berlin, GDR, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Peter Ludes, *DDR-Fernsehen intern, von der Honecker-Ära bis 'Deutschland einig Fernsehland'* [Inside East German television, from the Honecker era to German unification], Berlin 1990; Erich Selbmann, *DFF Adlershof: Wege übers Fernsehland; Zur Geschichte des DDR-Fernsehens* [The East German television studios in Adlershof: paths through television-land; on the history of East German television], Berlin 1998; Knut Hieckethier and Peter Hoff, *Geschichte des deutschen Fernsehens* [History of German television], Stuttgart 1998.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Rolf Geserick, *40 Jahre Presse, Rundfunk und Kommunikationspolitik in der DDR* [Forty years of press, broadcasting and communication policy in the GDR], Munich 1987; Woo-Seung Lee, *Das Fernsehen im geteilten Deutschland (1952–1989): Ideologische Konkurrenz und Programmliche Kooperation* [Television in divided Germany (1952–1989): ideological competition and programming cooperation], Potsdam 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Ernest Eugster, *Television Programming Across National Boundaries: The EBU and OIRT Experience*, Dedham, Mass. 1983.

But even after 1989/1990, in spite of their differentiated views of the historic fields of programming, institutions and technology, the disciplines of media and communication studies failed to give due attention to exchanges among the Eastern European television stations, and neglected or underestimated the proportions and the specifics of the imported and exported programmes, as well as their importance as a ‘fourth dimension of foreign policy’.<sup>5</sup> Such reserve is surprising in all cases in view of the numerous fields of investigation that would have been obvious even in the past, and the pertinent material that was already accessible then: the continuous exchange of news; the joint broadcasting of major sports and political events; the intense trade in films; the encounters at TV festivals and trade fairs, and the West German television networks’ direct contacts with Eastern European institutions, which culminated in ARD’s and ZDF’s little-noted associate membership of OIRT from 1988 on.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the organisational, legal and programming issues of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU; also known as the Union européenne de radio et télévision, UER) have been studied to date only from a Western perspective, although it cooperated with the Eastern European broadcasters more or less continuously since the early 1960s.<sup>7</sup>

Investigations have been concentrated primarily on the radical changes in broadcasting policy and the later integration of the societies in transformation in the global, competitive media market. Only very recently have substantial approaches to a comparative history of the media made their appearance, including those developed by participants in the ‘Tensions of Europe’ and ‘European Television History’ networks and the ‘Inventing Europe’ initiative, and those exposed on Internet platforms like ‘EUscreen’, offering programming and information on pan-European television culture.<sup>8</sup> Also noteworthy in this connection is the latest publication by Alexander Badenoch, Andreas Fickers and Heinrich-Christian Franke on international exchange during the Cold War.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Programming Transfer as a Challenge to Methodology: Terms and Concepts

A conceptual and methodological classification of the analytical concepts existing in the research would appear to be useful for the study of programming transfer and the related notions of exchange and transfer, since a great number of divergent terms for ‘trade’ and ‘exchange’ can be documented both in the sources and in the secondary literature, yet few attempts are made to define and differentiate them.

The term *programming transfer* serves as a generic term to describe both commercial and free transfer activities involving programming at a bilateral or multilateral level. Programming transfer is understood as the transfer of a programme through an international network, or as the transfer of a programme through bilateral agreements. Although this broad definition takes away some of the term’s analytical precision, it appears to be useful in describing the global implications of ‘trade’ and ‘exchange’ adequately. The term transfer also has another use as a tool for describing the reception history of a certain programme (whether a feature film, television films, series, or other programme) that was provided to various countries, where it was subject to different interpretations. This usage shifts the perspective from the actors to the viewers and critics, and describes a programme as a specific imported object.

<sup>5</sup> Philip H. Coombs, *The Fourth Dimension of Foreign Policy*, New York 1964.

<sup>6</sup> Anne-Marie Autissier et al., *Guide du cinéma et de l’audiovisuel en Europe centrale et orientale*, Paris 1992, p. 75.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Wolfgang Degenhardt and Elisabeth Strautz, *Auf der Suche nach dem europäischen Programm: Die Eurovision 1954–1970* [In search of the European programme: Eurovision, 1954–1970], Baden-Baden 2000; Rüdiger Zeller, *Die EBU: Internationale Rundfunkkooperation im Wandel* [The EBU: changes in international broadcasting cooperation], Baden-Baden 1999.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Andreas Fickers and Sonja Leeuw, ‘Das European Television History Network: europäische Fernsehgeschichtsschreibung in vergleichender Perspektive’ [European Television History Network: a comparative view of European television history], in *Medien & Zeit* (2005), no. 2, pp. 4–11, <http://www.euscreen.eu/> (accessed 2014-04-14).

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Badenoch, Andreas Fickers & Christian Henrich-Franke (eds), *Airy Curtains in the European Ether: Broadcasting and the Cold War*, Baden-Baden 2012.

We will also use the terms *programming exchange* and *programming trade*. *Programming exchange* is understood as a largely non-commercial process of transfer on the bilateral or multilateral level between television stations in East and West through centralized distribution networks (such as Intervision or Eurovision).

In contradistinction to *programming exchange*, *programming trade* means the commercial and primarily bilateral transfer of feature films and series between TV stations and private or state-controlled film distributors. Even before the age of television, cinema films were traded commercially and were thus the object of a capitalist business model.<sup>10</sup> The structures that had evolved in the film market were adopted for television, although there were significant differences in the forms of payment between socialist and capitalist countries. Within the socialist economic region, fixed prices were usually set by blanket agreements, while many different forms of payment are found in transactions with capitalist countries. The spectrum ranges from barter ('compensation transactions') to fixed-price arrangements to package purchases and payment based on gross earnings.

The different forms of transfer also influenced one another repeatedly: in other words, grey areas in international programming transfer can be discerned on multiple occasions. The definitions given will therefore serve as provisional tools, intended to facilitate an approach to and an understanding of the complex transfer relations.

A second purpose of the present study is to undertake a step in the direction of a methodical positioning of programming transfer. The initial conceptual approach will play an important part in that undertaking, since in our view there can be distinct methodological differences in the interpretation of programming exchange on the one hand and commercial programming trade on the other.

For programming exchange, a systems-theory approach would appear advantageous, since the synchronous availability of information and events is an important component in the globalization of media communication, and presupposes a global communications network. The concept of the world society advanced by Niklas Luhmann, which is understood as an expansion across national borders of the social systems constituted by communication, is substantiated to a significant degree by global media events.<sup>11</sup> Luhmann trenchantly summarized this observation in the statement that what we experience what we know about the 'world' through the mass media.<sup>12</sup> Recent examples include the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the financial crisis of 2007, but striking examples of worldwide mass media events can be found as far back as the 1950s. The coronation of Queen Elizabeth II on June 2, 1953, took place before the eyes of the world, and the first manned space flight by the Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin in 1961 also became a global media event.

With regard to commercial programming trade, the concepts of transcultural communication and cultural translation provide promising connecting points. According to Wolfgang Hepp, transcultural communication refers to those forms of communication that 'proceed across different cultures.'<sup>13</sup> Transcultural communication primarily entails mediate processes of interaction that are read and assimilated differently in different cultures. For the present topics of discussion, it is important to bear in mind Hepp's statement that the transcultural processes of communication through film cannot be adequately characterized as a 'travelling of [static] national film products', but must be read as separate media representations with diverging processes of assimilation.<sup>14</sup>

The globalization of media communication, which is essentially sustained by media products, and the closely related increase in transcultural communication make it more difficult to identify what is proper and what is foreign

<sup>10</sup> Günther Nerlich points this out as early as 1957 in regard to the DEFA studios' international transfers: see *Die ökonomischen und technischen Besonderheiten der Export- und Importtätigkeit des DEFA-Außenhandelsbetriebes* [The particular economic and technical characteristics of the DEFA foreign trade firm's export and import activities], *Diplom* thesis, Berlin, GDR, 1957, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Miriam Meckel, *Die globale Agenda: Kommunikation und Globalisierung* [The global agenda: communication and globalization], Wiesbaden 2001, p. 50.

<sup>12</sup> Niklas Luhmann, *Die Realität der Massenmedien* [The reality of the mass media], Wiesbaden 2009, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Andreas Hepp, *Transkulturelle Kommunikation* [Transcultural communication], Konstanz 2006, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Andreas Hepp, 'Über Filme, die reisen: Transkulturelle Filmkommunikation in Zeiten der Globalisierung der Medien' [On films that travel: transcultural film communication in times of media globalization], in: Irmbert Schenk (ed.), *Experiment Mainstream? Differenz und Uniformierung im populären Kino* [Experiment mainstream? Difference and uniformity in popular cinema], Berlin 2006, pp. 141–159; here p. 141.

to a given national context. Hepp mentions as a prime example the Hollywood films which are produced as global representations with a view to successful worldwide marketing, and which therefore elude a purely 'national' labelling.<sup>15</sup> Global representation in this example means that the media products of the Hollywood industry are composed of numerous transcultural elements that make these films internationally accessible and permit a separate interpretation in each importing country. For programming transfer in East German television in particular, Simone Lässig's concept of cultural translation raises our sensitivity to misunderstandings, resistance and failed transfer attempts.<sup>16</sup>

#### **4. The Example of East German Television: International and National Implications of Programming Transfer**

The beginnings of international programming transfer date back to the first half of the 20th century. International radio programming exchange was organized through the International Broadcasting Union (Union internationale de radiodiffusion, UIR) from 1929 on. The UIR was discredited by its close cooperation with Nazi Germany, however, and was disbanded soon after 1945. The founding of successor organizations reflected the increasingly evident division of the world after the end of World War II, and the world of television was likewise divided into two camps. Programming transfer in the socialist bloc was coordinated from 1946 on by the Organization Internationale de Radiodiffusion et de Télévision (OIRT). Its Intervision television network was founded in 1960 and based in Prague, like the OIRT itself. The OIRT was an umbrella organization and a representative agency for numerous television institutions, while Intervision served as a channel for direct programming exchange. On the other side of the 'iron curtain', the European Broadcasting Union was founded in 1950, and its television service Eurovision in 1954. In spite of its non-governmental status, most of the members of the multinational umbrella organization OIRT were state committees or administrative agencies, so that its strategic orientation was immediately influenced by central governments. Furthermore, the organization excluded commercial uses and privately owned TV stations. Unlike the EBU, it did not remain limited to European and Mediterranean countries.

A significant difference between the OIRT and the EBU is that the OIRT acted from its inception as a global organization with a politically grounded hegemonic mission, whereas the EBU was a project limited to Europe, and de facto to Western Europe, without a comparable political motivation. The Eastern organization also gave the Warsaw Pact countries a functioning control and propaganda instrument for their international media relations, which allowed them to shape their political public sphere by means of selected images. The USSR always set the tone, in chorus with the European Soviet republics Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, the Ukraine, and Byelorussia, which were formally independent voting members. In all, the OIRT membership included:

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>16</sup> Simone Lässig, 'Übersetzungen in der Geschichte: Geschichte als Übersetzung? Überlegungen zu einem analytischen Konzept und Forschungsgegenstand für die Geschichtswissenschaft' [Translations in history: history as translation? Towards an analytical concept and object of investigation for history], in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft: Zeitschrift für historische Sozialwissenschaft* 38 (2012) no. 2, pp. 192–197, here p. 195.



Figure 1: Central Members of the OIRT/Intervision: Bulgarian TV (BT), Czechoslovakia TV (CST), German Democratic Republic TV (DFF), Cuba (ICRT), Mongolia (MNT/ MOTV), Hungary (MTV), Poland (TVP), Romania (Source: OIRT/ Intervision archives, Collection of Thomas Beutelschmidt)]

- all the countries aligned with the Eastern bloc, from Cuba to Vietnam, including Albania, the People's Republic of China and North Korea (although the latter countries' membership was temporarily inactive after their break with the USSR);
- allies of the USSR temporarily led by communist parties, such as Nicaragua and Afghanistan;
- African and Middle Eastern states that were temporarily associated with and supported by the socialist camp, such as Mali, Algeria, and the Sudan; and those which had sought a close association, such as Egypt, Syria and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen.

An exception was Finland, which had a particular mediating status as a non-aligned neighbour of the USSR, and was a member of the EBU, Intervision, Eurovision and the Scandinavian organization Nordvision.

The first new member to join OIRT after its founding was the East German broadcasting system in 1951. This was a further step in the integration of the GDR in the 'socialist world system', after its official or symbolic recognition by the community of socialist states and its membership of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon). In 1960 the GDR also became a founding member of Intervision, and in 1972 it joined the Intersputnik organization for satellite communication.

Programming transfer in East German television was handled from 1964 by the 'programming exchange and film' section. To acquire programmes, the section's staff visited the major television and film trade fairs, television stations, film distributors and direct licensors such as the Kirch Group.<sup>17</sup> Programmes were assessed for their suitability on the spot and then purchased individually or in package deals, depending on contract conditions. For the socialist countries there was a regular cycle of one or two screenings per year, which were usually held directly at the television stations and/or the film studios. Because licensing conditions were governed by framework agreements, financial issues were usually secondary.

<sup>17</sup> Employees visited the Cannes festival, the BBC, and the Soviet television agency TSS, for example.

For the capitalist countries on the other hand, economic considerations were much more important. In the absence of framework agreements, licenses were usually negotiated for individual programmes, then beginning in the 1970s, for programme packages. The Western programmes acquired were mainly top-class films (*'Spitzenfilme'*) and high-quality series, to be broadcast in prominent slots (at prime time or near the end of the year). Screenings of Western productions took place at the international programming trade fairs. From the 1970s on, East German television had more intensive direct contacts with the West German television networks ARD and ZDF, and with private film distributors. From the mid-1970s on, East German television had dealings with broadcasters in more than 70 countries, and had contractual relations with 52 television institutions. On the socialist side, the main trading partner of East German television remained the Soviet Union. Among the capitalist countries, West Germany became a key cooperating partner after the mutual recognition of the German states in 1972.

The increasing demand for programming in conjunction with economic limitations necessitated the use of all the efficient and cost-saving acquisition channels that were available. Programming exchange through the OIRT and Intervision was such a channel. Among the programmes obtained in this way, sports are seen to dominate, followed by political reporting and entertainment genres. Journalism, cultural programmes and children's programmes were acquired less frequently. The programming preferences of the socialist partner countries were largely similar. The spectrum ranged from the obligatory success reports about ritualized ceremonies marking Party conventions and anniversaries (of the founding of communist states, the 'liberation' of Germany on May 8, the 'Day of World Peace' on September 1, and the 'Day of the Workers' Struggle' on May 1) to redundant 'general topics' such as internalized antifascism, the glorified workers' movement and the commemoration of the Great Socialist October Revolution. Most of these programmes, concerned with commemorative culture and historical legitimacy or highlighting social 'achievements' and economic performance, were aimed at documenting the advanced civilization and the alleged superiority of real socialism.

However, fictional TV films and series and non-fictional entertainment programmes such as popular music shows were also used to transport a message in keeping with party principles through internationally accessible programming. Entertainment was also controlled and required to contribute in a lighter way to promoting the Eastern bloc's shared values and patriotic solidarity. The programmes circulated among the socialist countries, with their ideologically charged subjects and their dedication to realistic modes of representation, can be seen as the last bastion of a socialist television mandate based on shared ideological premises. Many programme genres refer to central discourses of dominance and to a certain degree construct a 'mental map' of Eastern Europe.

Yet in spite of the dominant political foundation of East German television, certain dynamics inherent in the medium were also apparent that ran counter to the logic of politics and cultural policy, and that increasingly contributed to the dissolution of the 'closed world of meaning' from the 1970s on. The first of these is the continuously increasing 'hunger for programming' that resulted from expanded broadcasting hours. East German television transmitted 3007 hours of programming in 1960, 6028 hours in 1970 and 8900 hours in 1989, the last full year of the GDR's existence.<sup>18</sup> The introduction of colour television and a second channel in 1969 further increased the demand for technically advanced programming. As a consequence, the programming needs could not be met by domestic production, nor by programming exchange with the Intervision member countries and programming transfer with the socialist countries' state film companies. The expansion of efforts to import from Western programming suppliers became inevitable. After the transition of Party leadership from Walter Ulbricht to Erich Honecker in 1971, this was accompanied by a rapid realignment of East German television towards more entertainment, reinforcing the trend towards a partial depoliticization of programming. The programming section responsible for international tasks usurped a dominant position in the overall structure of the institution, and provided a considerable portion of the programming. In 1964, foreign programming made up barely 35% of East German television broadcasts; by 1972 that proportion had increased to over 45%.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, the steady growth of foreign programming led to the increasing importance of economic issues. Successful 'blockbusters' could only be acquired with considerable financial efforts.

<sup>18</sup> *Statistisches Jahrbuch der DDR* [Statistical yearbook of the GDR], 1965, p. 469; 1972, p. 391; 1991, p. 356.

<sup>19</sup> German Federal Archives (BArch), DR 8/141.

In the long run, the new programming transfers achieved more than a diversification of programming: they also tended to contribute – as in the West, if somewhat later – to ‘uniformity and schematism’<sup>20</sup> and to a gradual convergence with other European television nations.

The question arises in this connection how the state supervisory bodies reacted to the gradual breaking of the socialist-encoded programming mandate. It is noteworthy that the competent authorities usually tolerated the disparate range of programmes, and reacted only in rare instances. In 1987, leading representatives of the East German film and television guild (*Verband der Film- und Fernsehschaffenden der DDR*) reflected on East German television’s import policy and came to conclusions that they considered alarming: the number of ideologically questionable shows from capitalist countries was increasingly dominant in East German television, they found, and they characterized the dominant orientation towards commercial entertainment films as particularly problematic. East German television was in danger of becoming a ‘copy’ of West German TV: ‘In view of this alleged import and programming policy in East German television, questions are raised about the intellectual and thematic profile of our socialist film and television production, and to a certain extent doubts are expressed about the meaning and the credibility of our political and ideological orientation for the East German film industry.’<sup>21</sup>

To sum up, the example of East German television shows the potential long-term effects of continuing, constantly expanding programming transfer, with demonstrable consequences on many levels. Although the medium was subject to far-reaching mechanisms of political control and was considered an important ‘weapon’ in the propaganda struggle between the two social systems, a shift is observable over time from confrontational patterns of communication towards a certain rapprochement and openness to dialogue. In spite of the incontrovertible political power of the Party organization, the media system in the GDR appears to have had its own internal dynamics and differentiation, and was unable to isolate itself completely from global currents of development. The efforts to establish a cultural policy of ‘socialist national culture’ in East Germany had to contend with an environment of cross-cultural influence, globalization and cultural diversification.<sup>22</sup>

## Biography:

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<sup>20</sup> Eckert, Gerhard, *Das Fernsehen in den Ländern Westeuropas: Entwicklung und gegenwärtiger Stand* [Television in the Western European countries: development and current conditions], Gütersloh 1965.

<sup>21</sup> Central SED Party Archives, office of Kurt Hager, ‘Verband der Film- und Fernsehschaffenden’, 1987-09-21, in BArch DY 30/35491, fol. 6.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.