

## [H-Diplo Article Review 660 on “The Steering of the Press in the Socialist States of Eastern Europe: the German Democratic Republic \(GDR\) as a Case Study.” Cold War History 15:4](#)

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### Article Review

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**Anke Fiedler and Michael Meyen.** “The Steering of the Press in the Socialist States of Eastern Europe: the German Democratic Republic (GDR) as a Case Study.” *Cold War History* 15:4 (November 2015): 449-470. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2015.1028531>

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Review by **Mandy Tröger**, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

This article adds nicely to the earlier work of Anke Fiedler and Michael Meyen. Once again, the authors strive to broaden our current understanding of how media in socialist East Germany functioned. Their overall aim is to show how multifaceted the management and suppression of information really was within a communication system that is generally regarded as having been monolithic, allowing its media to be uniform at best. Fiedler and Meyen do this by using a mixed-method approach combining quantitative and qualitative content analysis of over 6,000 press instructions of media officials and over 17,000 German Democratic Republic (GDR) articles from four different newspapers. This richness in sources in itself deserves recognition. It is a unique undertaking that finds no equivalent in current research. The results are overall convincing though by no means uncontroversial, which is hardly surprising given the study’s research design and its theoretical outlook. The latter questions Western-centric assumptions and narratives according to which socialist (media) history is being constructed, the former is dazzling through its complexity. These challenges are met, first, by Fiedler and Meyen’s emphasis that changing measures of media steering cannot be understood one-dimensionally. Instead they consistently argue for the close connections between national and international sociopolitical developments and the changing ‘policies’ of information control by the East German State Party. Into this discussion they embed,

secondly, an exhaustive content analysis of press coverage that aims to track the consequences of this control. The study, thirdly, benefits from the authors' in-depth knowledge of the workings of media and communication within the social context of socialist East Germany.

Depending on the reader's openness towards new approaches in media history, Fiedler and Meyen's study can help redefine the ways to think of media control in the GDR and/or other socialist states. Both authors put GDR media analysis on an equal level with Western and/or West German media history, and not, as it is often done, as its 'irregular' and or illegitimate counterpart. One indicator for this, and a more obvious bone of contention, is Fiedler and Meyen's use of the term "political public relations" to describe information steering in the GDR. Relying on the work of Klaus Merten who defines the term as "the management of the difference between fact and artefact" (450), Fiedler and Meyen conceptualize it in ways that make it fit to be used for the "'politically staged public sphere' in the GDR" (454). Rejecting the more convenient term 'propaganda' on the basis that it "pre-empts the result of the actual analysis" (454), the authors aim for a more differentiated look at their study object.

There are different ways one can approach Fiedler and Meyen's criticism and their corresponding use of terminology. One can, of course, reject it and emphasize the differences between public relations and propaganda. One can thereby think of Edward Bernays' 1928 book *Propaganda* in which he expresses his enthusiasm for propaganda, taking it as a prerequisite for the workings of Western democracies, but then ponder on the change of meanings after two world wars.<sup>4</sup> One can also ask for similarities between the workings of political public relations and propaganda and thereby address questions of motives when applying one seemingly specific term to one seemingly specific context. How much of this specificity is constructed and how much does its marking rhetoric indeed pre-empt research results?

Generally, Fiedler and Meyen's article does not (nor does it intend to) solve the ongoing debate on whether or not the terms propaganda and public relations can or should be used interchangeably. They give their reasons as to why they chose to break with familiar patterns and are thereby more or less coherent with their overall research design, which is to open up and diversify media analysis in socialist countries. Though one might not agree with their general argument or with its specifics, Fiedler and Meyen's change of terminology can still be enlightening. It points to the crucial role language plays in the ways we construct narratives to make sense of the world. Questioning well-established ideas and norms that find their expressions in language through the use of language itself helps us confront our own given truths about history. Dealing with this issue is not an either/or question. Rather, challenging and/or defending that which is commonly accepted hopefully necessitates in studies equally rich in sources and findings to prove their points. And this can only be fruitful for all.

If one is open to their arguments, Fiedler and Meyen convincingly show that the GDR press and its steering can best be characterized as "uniformity with profile" (464), meaning there existed spaces of adaptation and difference. On the one hand, this was because over the years media (instructions) responded to changing (inter)national political and economic conditions. On the other hand, with increasing political and economic interdependencies between the GDR and Western countries, as well as more complex societal structures, media representations also became more diverse and so did the corresponding aims of their control. It is questionable if these linear conclusions give an exhaustive

explanation for why and how certain topics were covered and others were not. It is, however, highly enlightening to detect long-term shifts in press coverage regarding topics, rhetoric, and/or countries of interest in the East German press while simultaneously having insights into background media instructions.

The study does offer quantitative evidence that within limits one can find diversity in and amongst different GDR newspapers, particularly in those sections deemed not as important to the Party's information agenda. These sections were devoted in particular to culture, education, and society, an aspect generally disregarded in the literature. Another point included by Fielder and Meyen is the knowledge of information control shared by the GDR readership. The national paper *Neues Deutschland* was understood to be a government paper, and so was the news agency Allgemeiner Deutsche Nachrichtendienst (ADN). Indicating the latter as the source of information made it clear to the reader that information was controlled. These social apprehensions amongst a readership that are often left out whenever content analysis is used to approach questions of GDR media are crucial for an all-inclusive analysis of its workings in socialist countries. Third, GDR media and its steering did not work within an enclosed system of information (control). Rather it consistently found itself in a highly complex setting of diverse information coming from West-German broadcast media and the everyday lived experience of its GDR population. Negotiating these different (even if limited) informational spheres and political interests, as well as acknowledging the highly complex and complicated political and geographic setting of GDR media, makes one wonder how it could have ever been that media steering in the GDR was assumed to have been monolithic at all.

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## Notes

[1] Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1928).