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Introduction

The advent of the Cold War coincided with the rise of a new medium that came to occupy a central place in the everyday lives of citizens on both sides of the Iron Curtain. While the historical growth and social impact of television in the West have long attracted substantial and sustained scholarly attention, the medium's trajectories elsewhere in the world have taken longer to reach the academic radar.[1] The development of television in countries under communist rule, in particular, has been of marginal relevance to mainstream media and communication research – an object of interest to media historians and area specialists perhaps, but of limited significance to central debates in the field.[2] At first glance, the lack of interest in state socialist television may seem warranted. State socialist television, so the story goes, was a grey vehicle of propaganda which viewers ignored as much as possible, tuning into signals from their glamorous capitalist neighbours wherever and whenever they could. Yet this story is challenged by the sizeable audiences that state socialist television attracted throughout its existence and the fondness with which viewers remember many socialist-era television programs. To be sure, many viewers complained and even joked about the content of television programs. Even so, television's presence in viewers' living rooms ensured a constant means of contact between party and citizen,

[1] Research on television beyond the West started gaining momentum only around the turn of the century, with volumes such as Abu-Lughod (2005); Mankekar (1999); Rajagopal (2001).

[2] The majority of recent book-length studies of state socialist television have come from historians or area specialists rather than media or cultural studies experts. The first major exception to this in the English language is Imre (2016). See also notes 25 and 26.

and acted as an important source of shared sociality, aligned with communist values and goals. Yet, as shown in this book, television achieved all this while largely failing to engender a sense of unqualified adherence to communism. Thus, the history of state socialist television has much to tell us about the complex relationship between state and society during state socialism and, in doing so, has the capacity to challenge long-standing convictions about media and communication under totalitarian rule.

The experience of state socialist television we discuss in this book is not only of historical relevance. Rather, we use this foray into the long-dead era of Cold War broadcasting to advance a number of general arguments relevant to communication and media research. First and foremost, we seek to reorient the focus of comparative media research from media systems to media cultures. The comparative study of media systems and their relationships with political systems has received a substantial amount of attention in recent years and made significant strides in explicating the diversity of mediated communication around the world Yet, while important, this systemic approach offers only a partial insight into the social implications of mediated communication and, more generally, into the diversity of global media landscapes. To gain a fuller grasp of this diversity, we need to acknowledge that socially significant communication extends well beyond the traditional domains of politics, and encompasses the mediation of basic cultural ideals and narratives, as well as the structuring of everyday practices and routines. These include the perceptions of private and public life, the understanding of the nation and its position in the world, the modes of organizing daily routines and everyday spaces, and the historical events remembered and celebrated on a mass scale. To investigate these dimensions, we develop an analytical framework that conceives of media cultures as patterns of ideas and practices that enable mediated meaning formation, and that have distinct spatial and temporal characteristics. These media cultures, we argue, can vary on a number of dimensions, from the extent to which they seek to serve public or private goals, the degree to which they are open to transnational exchanges, and to their modes of engaging with the past, present, and future. This framework can be applied to different media and cultural forms, in diverse political and cultural contexts.

Second, we use the historical experience of socialist television to unsettle some of the key concepts in contemporary communication and media research, and question their global relevance. For instance, although talking of a socialist public sphere may seem a contradiction in

terms, there is no doubt that socialist policymakers and television professionals had a clear sense of public mission and explicitly sought to use television as a means of stimulating public engagement and even social critique. What does this mean for our established ways of conceptualising television's involvement in the public sphere, or for our understanding of public service broadcasting? Or, to take another example: how are we to interpret the transnational ambitions of socialist television, and how do they relate to the much-debated processes of Americanization, cultural imperialism, and cultural globalization? To make sense of socialist television's trajectory, and situate it vis-à-vis its counterparts elsewhere in the world, we suggest a number of revisions to established concepts and arguments. Drawing on recent debates in sociology and history, as well as in media and cultural studies, we also propose a new theoretical agenda for comparative media research, anchored in the notion of entangled modernities. Following this approach, the different trajectories of media development around the world can be seen as resulting from multiple, yet connected, visions of modernity and modern society. The different modern visions evident in Cold War TV in many instances engaged with and responded to each other. This created a discourse that both reinforced the distinctions between varieties of modernity and also created the conditions for their mutual entanglement. This understanding of modernity and television chimes with proposals put forward by several other authors examining media cultures beyond the Western world, and offers a particularly suitable frame for conceptualizations that are sensitive to the diversity of media trajectories globally.

Third, this book enhances our understanding of the specificities of mediated communication in non-democratic settings. This is not of marginal importance to our discipline. When we began to think about this project, over a decade ago, it was still possible that the liberal media world was here to stay, and that its historical competitors, state socialist media systems included, had been consigned to the dustbin of history. Even then, of course, we felt that the study of state socialist television was important and relevant: it served as a reminder that the liberal media world that seemed so entrenched at that point was not the only one possible, but had historically evolved in competition with very different arrangements of mediated communication. Today such a reminder is no longer needed. As the 'illiberal turn' sweeping through democracies both old and new attests, it would be wrong to think that the liberal democratic approach to media governance possesses a universal and lasting appeal, or that it is inseparable from the global advance of commercial media ownership. Studying the bygone era of state

socialist television in Eastern Europe is therefore not merely of historical relevance, but helps address some of the key questions that face media researchers in the present. How do media systems and cultures emerging in non-democratic contexts differ from those familiar in democratic environments? In what ways do the media in non-democratic contexts seek to affect audiences, and how effective are they in their endeavour? What is the role of new communication technologies in cementing the status quo, but potentially also in disrupting prevailing beliefs and routines, and existing relationships of power? The contemporary onslaught on the liberal media order is of course taking place in a political and media landscape that is rather different from the one that prevailed during the Cold War. Nonetheless, it is only through a better understanding of the differences and similarities between various media systems and cultures, both old and new, near and far, that we will be in a better position to appreciate where the current developments are heading. Understanding the historical experiences of socialist television is an important prerequisite for this endeavour.

The remainder of this introduction first provides a brief outline of the methodological and theoretical framework adopted in the book and explains how it departs from existing practices in comparative media research. The second part of the chapter looks more closely at the reasons that make the historical formation of state socialist television a particularly attractive object of comparative media cultures research. Central to this is the importance of understanding television's relationship with the communist political project: did communist authorities during the Cold War manage to harness the potential of television to advance their revolutionary ideas, or did television set in motion a revolution of its own, contributing to developments that in the long run proved detrimental to the communist project? As we shall see, the answer lies somewhere in the middle: television was immensely successful at weaving communist ideals into the very texture of everyday life, providing a basis of shared rituals and other forms of sociality, but did so without necessarily inspiring a commitment to the communist agenda. As such, television had an ambiguous relationship with the communist project: it served as an anchor of normality and thereby contributed to the stability and longevity of communist rule, while at the same time allowing the ideological message to become ever more blurred.

FROM MEDIA SYSTEMS TO MEDIA CULTURES

Comparative media research has advanced considerably over the past two decades, evolving from a marginal preoccupation to a well-established

subfield of media and communication research. As Sonia Livingstone notes, the conduct of research within a single country can no longer be taken for granted, and has to be accompanied, at the very minimum, by asking whether the findings are limited to that country or are part of a wider transnational trend.[3] In the process of achieving greater recognition in the field, comparative research has also reached a considerable level of methodological and theoretical sophistication, and enlarged its substantive and geographical scope. As a result, it is now possible to identify a significant body of comparative work across all the major subfields of communication and media research, ranging from political communication to social interaction, and from media policy and regulation to audience reception.[4]

Yet if we look more closely at which kinds of substantive questions, geographical areas, and units of analysis have received the most attention, it is clear that existing research focuses primarily on Western media, is marked by a preference for national media systems as the sole units of analysis, and is heavily biased in favour of political communication and news genres. These tendencies are clearly evident in what is presently the most influential study in the field, namely Hallin and Mancini's *Comparing Media Systems*.[5] In this landmark book, the authors examine eighteen countries in Western Europe and North America, focusing on news media and regulation, conceived as parts of national media systems. Although the choice of the term 'system' implies comprehensiveness, the focus on news media and regulation effectively means that what are being compared are, for the most part, political communication systems, rather than media systems in general. The authors readily acknowledge that their analysis could be expanded to encompass other cultural industries, including television, but admit that this would 'involve other literatures and require very different sets of concepts'.[6]

The shortcomings of existing comparative work are often noted in the literature, but the various critiques and suggestions for improvements have not yet coalesced into a substantive new framework. For instance, several scholars have sought to expand and amend existing media typologies and comparative frameworks by looking at cases beyond those of Western Europe and North America.[7] Yet, despite some notable

[3] Livingstone (2012), p. 415.
[4] For an overview see Esser and Hanitzsch (2012).
[5] Hallin and Mancini (2004).
[6] Ibid. p. 7.
[7] E.g. Dobek-Ostrowska et al. (2010); Downey and Mihelj (2012); Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez (2014); Hallin and Mancini (2012a); Voltmer (2013).

theoretical and methodological advances, this body of work typically consists of country-by-country compilations or comparative treatments that zoom in on narrowly defined aspects of media systems. Likewise, some authors have pointed to the need to reorient the attention of comparative research from systemic to cultural aspects of mediated communication, yet these discussions have given rise neither to a shared approach, nor to a firm understanding of what comparing media cultures actually involves.[8] Finally, many scholars have highlighted the inherent methodological nationalism of existing research and proposed methodological solutions designed to make comparative work more sensitive to transnational exchanges and influences.[9] However, these solutions are yet to be tried and tested on a substantive body of empirical materials.

The subject matter examined in this book required us to make methodological choices very different from those adopted by Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini. It also offered us the opportunity to take on board diverse suggestions for improvements developed since the publication of *Comparing Media Systems*, integrate them into a new analytical framework, and test their usefulness empirically. The framework we propose differs from those prevailing in existing work in a number of ways. Apart from the obvious shift in geographical focus, and the fact that we examine a set of communist-ruled countries rather than liberal democracies, our concern with television required us to move beyond news and encompass a considerably more varied range of genres and modes of communication, including fiction and entertainment. At the same time, our intention to combine institutional and programme analysis with audience history also meant that the focus of analytical attention moved from the vertical relationships between media systems and political systems to the horizontal processes of meaning-formation that tie together producers, programmes, and audiences.

This reorientation can best be conceived in terms of a shift in focus from comparing media *systems* to comparing media *cultures*. Systemic aspects are of course not absent from our investigation; in fact, we argue that a comparative inquiry into media cultures cannot proceed without

[8] E.g. Couldry and Hepp (2012); Hanitzsch (2007). A more comprehensive survey of existing research that deals comparatively with cultural aspects of communication is provided in Chapter 1.
[9] E.g. Esser (2013); Hardy (2012); Livingstone (2003).

a parallel consideration of media systems, which constitute one of the major contextual factors that help explain why media cultures are the way they are. The vast majority of the analysis presented in the empirical sections of this book, however, focuses on media cultures themselves, the specific patterns of practices and meanings that constitute them, and the ways in which these patterns are negotiated in processes that tie together the circuits of media production, texts, reception, and use.

The emphasis on culture may leave the impression that our intention is to link the diversity of media cultures to ethnocultural or civilizational differences, and distinguish between 'French', 'Polish', 'British', and 'Russian' media cultures, or between 'European', 'Asian', 'African', or 'Latin American' media cultures. This is not how the relationship between media cultures and global contexts is conceptualized in this book. Reducing media cultures to cultural differences runs the risk of adopting an essentialist understanding of culture and cannot fully explain the diversity of media cultures. Instead, our analytical move from media systems to media cultures is coupled with a novel theoretical approach to comparative media research, anchored in the notion of entangled varieties of modernity.[10] This approach helps us situate socialist television trajectories vis-à-vis their counterparts around the globe, as well as understanding intra-regional variation in the socialist world itself. As such, analyzing the entangled varieties of modernity also serves to advance the agenda of 'de-Westernizing' or internationalizing communication and media research.[11] However, this de-Westernization is achieved in a manner that steers away from the culture-centricity often advocated as an alternative to West-centred approaches – namely, the tendency to explain differences between Western and non-Western media cultures as results of ethno-cultural or civilizational diversity.[12]

This is not to say that cultural differences should be ignored. As shown in our analysis, state socialist television cultures differed depending, among other factors, on the character of gender relations, the level of acceptance of religious traditions, and the nature of national historical narratives in a particular context. Yet, such cultural differences are not all that mattered; they constituted pieces of a much larger puzzle. State socialist television cultures also differed depending on the foreign policies

[10] E.g. Arnason (2000); Dirlik (2003); Eisenstadt (1974); Schmidt (2006); Therborn (2003).
[11] Curran and Park (2000); Thussu (2009); Wang (2011).
[12] E.g. Chen (2007); Miike (2007).

of the country and the transnational orientations of broadcast infrastructure, on the relative core-periphery position of the country and its television system, on the extent and forms of party-state control over the media, and on the timing of infrastructural developments they were tied to. To unpack these multiple factors, we approach different media cultures as rooted in different visions of modern society, all stemming from similar core assumptions about the nature of human beings and their relationship to the world, and sharing a tendency towards structural differentiation, but articulated through different constellations of modern institutions, including different models of media systems. By foregrounding the shared traits of the different varieties of modernity, this approach avoids reducing the diversity of global media landscapes to a narrow range of cultural differences, and enables us to theorize the shared traits and also the distinctive qualities of media cultures within a common conceptual framework.

WHY STATE SOCIALIST TELEVISION?

State socialist[13] television provides a particularly apposite testing ground for a comparative framework centred on media cultures and anchored in the notion of entangled varieties of modernity. As part of the communist propaganda apparatus, socialist television formed an integral part of a political, economic, and cultural system that set out self-consciously to develop an alternative form of modernity, one premised on communist rule and the planned economy and designed to give rise to a classless society. Culture – including media culture – formed an essential part of this revolutionary endeavour. The good life anticipated by communist rulers promised not only education, health, and social security for all, but also a genuinely common 'mass culture', one that would extend its appeal beyond educated elites, erase differences of taste between classes, and involve individuals of all backgrounds not only as audiences, but also as cultural producers.[14] In such a context, culture in all its

[13] In this book, we chose to use the epithet 'state socialist' rather than 'communist' when referring to television, as well as when talking of societies and countries. In contrast, we use the label 'communist' when referring to the form of rule, the party elite, and values and visions of progress. This decision to talk about 'socialist' television was in part influenced by the fact that this is the preferred label in most of existing literature on the topic (but see Bren, 2010, for a notable exception). We also felt that this terminological choice reflected the dual nature of our object of investigation, and more generally the tension between the communist vision and politics on the one hand, and the historical reality of societies and cultures on the other.

[14] See Fitzpatrick (1992); Mihelj (2011b).

manifestations, including those embodied in the mass media, was endowed with a tremendous burden of responsibility, but also with a sense of prestige and authority. As Stephen Lovell points out in his plea for a 'media-centred' approach to Soviet history, culture was 'not simply the handmaiden of politics; it was more akin to a valued senior employee'.[15] As we shall show further on in the book, this elevated status meant that the state socialist media and cultural industries enjoyed some independence and could on occasion offer their own interpretations of the party line.

While endeavouring to foster an alternative form of modern society and culture, state socialist television was not entirely different from its relative in the West, or completely isolated from it. Television in the state socialist world in many ways shared the trajectory of its Western cousin and became involved in some of the central processes of transformation that marked the post-World War II era. Television offered tangible proof of a country's ability to master modernity, as well as promising access to education, culture, and information for all, and thereby acted as a means by which post-war welfare regimes could deliver the dream of a good life to all of their citizens. It represented powerful means both of national integration and of globalization, and also responded to the thirst for cheap entertainment among the fast-growing urban populations which enjoyed increasing amounts of leisure time and income. As Christine Evans rightly points out, these shared traits of television both East and West were in no small part generated by the nature of the Cold War contest in which the Soviet Union and the United States, along with their allies, competed over the inheritance of the Enlightenment, more specifically over the best ways of delivering a good life to all.[16] To put it differently, the similarities between television trajectories on both sides of the Iron Curtain testify to their shared participation in the project of modernity, and act as a reminder that 'the story of modernity is not just the story of liberal capitalism; it is the story of liberalism and socialism and their relationship to one another'.[17]

Understanding state socialist television, then, requires us to approach it as a specific subtype of modern television, in many ways similar to its Western cousin, but also designed to promote an alternative vision of progress and belonging – one premised on a teleological vision of history centred on the revolution and culminating in a socially equal, worker-led society. A central question of this book concerns the extent to which communist authorities and TV professionals managed to use the medium

[15] Lovell (2015), p. 1. [16] Evans (2016), pp. 30–31. [17] Gumbert (2014), p. 4.

to further their revolutionary goals. How exactly, and to what extent, did the alternative vision of progress advanced by the party translate into actual patterns of television production, forms of programming, and audience use? Were these patterns successful in promoting the communist cause?

At first sight, television technology offered a uniquely powerful means of furthering the revolution. As with radio, its social reach was not tied to the advance of literacy, and its gradual institutionalization as a domestic medium meant that messages produced centrally could reach citizens in the comfort of their homes, removing the need for an intricate network of local propagandists. In addition, its ability to offer an instantaneous, 'live' connection with unfolding events also held the promise of engendering shared participation in the onward march of revolutionary progress. But television went even further than radio. The ability to couple sound with moving image had the potential to make messages both more accessible and appealing to a wider range of audiences, and also significantly broadened the range of forms and genres that could be transmitted. This included not only the possibility of broadcasting propaganda films or the latest theatre performance of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, but also the opportunity to capture popular participation in the communist project in its full splendour, transmitting live images of mass rallies and showcasing the achievements of model workers. Finally, the combination of the medium's visual nature with its liveness and the domesticity seemed to provide television with an ability to create a uniquely intimate, authentic, and truthful insight into the inner world of individuals otherwise unavailable to the naked eye. This 'new vision' (*novoe zrenie*), as the 'prophet' of Soviet television Vladimir Sappak called it, could generate a 'revolution in perception ... through which man might be jolted out of his quotidian routine and caused to see the world in a new, more authentic way'.[18] Television, then, was an inherently revolutionary medium, seemingly perfectly suited to advance the communist project.

This was the theory, but the practice of socialist television suggests a more complicated picture. As recent research indicates, every advantage brought by television also harboured a disadvantage. It quickly became obvious that the addition of the moving image did little to increase the appeal of political speeches, not least because professional propagandists were often reluctant to embrace the new medium and preferred to stick to traditional methods of direct oral agitation.[19] By contrast, cultural

[18] Quoted in Evans (2016), pp. 236–238. [19] Roth-Ey (2011), pp. 192–196.