

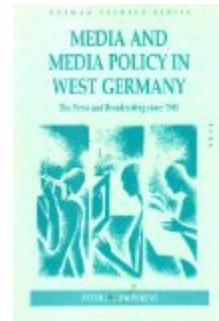
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Peter J. Humphreys. *Media and Media Policy in Germany: The Press and Broadcasting since 1945*. Oxford and Providence, RI: Berg Publishers, 1994. xii + 381pp.p. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-85496-853-4; \$49.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-85496-187-0.

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## P. J. Humphreys: Media and Media Policy in Germany

The relationship between the media and the government is among the most contentious issues in current political discourse. While almost everyone acknowledges that some citizens, especially children, need to be protected from inappropriate media, there is a great deal of disagreement regarding what constitutes unsuitability, who should make that determination, and the extent to which government should be involved in the process. Peter Humphreys' book, 'Media and Media Policy in Germany: The Press and Broadcasting since 1945', establishes that questions regarding relations between the state and the media are not unique to the United States and that these issues have been politically divisive in other cultures as well. Indeed, as Humphreys persuasively argues, these questions are among the most important any liberal democracy faces.

These problems were especially important in post-war West Germany. During the Weimar years, which provided so many lessons for the founders of the Federal Republic, the media had been, on the whole, unsympathetic to the government. Alfred Hugenberg's vast media empire played an important role in the collapse of the Republic and Adolf Hitler's seizure of power. In contrast, the Third Reich witnessed the ideological expropriation of the press by the state. While this tradition continued in the Soviet zone of occupation and the German Democratic Republic (DDR), the western allies, and subsequently the leaders of West Germany, were determined to develop a free press that promoted democratic institutions. Each of the occupying powers had a differ-

ent method of achieving this goal. The British, for example, created a media apparatus in which political authorities had a great deal of influence. The Americans, on the other hand, established more politically independent media influenced by corporate groups, like the churches and civic organizations. In the end, this hybrid system, which guarantees a relatively free press sympathetic to the institutions of liberal democracy, has proven to work effectively in the Federal Republic both before and after reunification.

The Basic Law's guarantee of a free press has protected the German media from politically motivated attacks. Reminiscent of some conservative elements in the contemporary United States, during the 1950s and 1960s the Christian Democrats attacked public broadcasting for an alleged "leftist" bias, but fortunately to no avail. But, just as in the United States, a free press has had its price. Low quality newspapers appealing to the lowest common denominator, most notoriously Axel Springer's 'Bild Zeitung', have contributed to the deterioration of serious political discourse, as has the introduction of commercial television, especially cable. Yet as Humphreys points out, a vibrant "alternative" press has done much to overcome this problem.

In media policy, as in so many other areas, reunification has amounted to annexation. The media apparatus of the Federal Republic simply absorbed that of the DDR in the years 1989-1990, and although there has been a great deal of resentment over this development, the citi-

zens of the 'neue Laender' realize that they will be better off in the long run. Indeed, the consolidation of the media, in both its successes and failures, has been a microcosm of the entire reunification process.

'Media and Media Policy in a Germany' is a richly detailed, informative overview of the history of the press, radio, and television in the Federal Republic. Humphreys convincingly establishes that the Germans attempted, and for the most part succeeded, in breaking with their "totalitarian" past, at least in the area of media policy, and that the western allies made an important contribution to this development. He deals with the issues of continuity and discontinuity effectively, establishing that both characteristics are present in the evolution of the post-war German media. In some ways 1945 was a 'Stunde

Null'; in others it was not. While the Nazi past was indeed rejected, many of the media bosses of the post-war years, like Axel Springer, were holdovers from the Weimar years, contributing the expertise that the post-1945 German media otherwise would have lacked.

Although Humphreys, a Fellow of the European Institute of the Media, did no archival research, he is extremely knowledgeable regarding the published sources on the West German media, making the book a valuable overview of the current research on the subject. This is where Humphreys' thorough account of the post-war German media makes an important contribution.

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