

Methods for Studying Non-U.S. Television

“Lessons from the audiovisual archive of a defunct socialist state”

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I began working abroad in the archives of the former East German television service *Fernsehen der DDR* (Television of the GDR, or German Democratic Republic).¹ One of my earliest memories was the time I requested the files of the notorious Black Channel television series (1960-1989) from my archivist. It was a big moment for me at the time, as I prepared to look at the files from perhaps one of the most symbolic series of the early Cold War, in which ideologue Eduard von Schnitzler repackaged kinescoped news from the other side of the border with his own, communist-inflected interpretation. The archivist stopped me in my tracks, unwilling to fulfill the request. I did not immediately understand why these files seemed off limits. To clarify his reluctance, he took me right into the repository and showed me what seemed endless files stored on a multitude of shelves. You must choose, was the edict.

I should point out that, for historians, it is pretty unlikely to be ushered into a repository of historical documents to poke around and make decisions, as if in a library. (It never happened again). But in a nutshell, this incident exemplifies a few themes worth some discussion, including the relatively availability or lack of sources, their accessibility (which is often a separate question), and what those documents represent in terms of interpretive value.

I should also note that I am making comparative claims that may or may not reflect the experience of scholars of Anglo-American television. I have worked primarily in German archives, including the [German Broadcasting Archive](#) (DRA), the [German Federal Archive](#), several German libraries, and a few visits to the [German Kinemathek](#) (Berlin) in its early days. I have also visited the [Margaret Herrick Library](#) in Los Angeles. As a point of comparison, I will say that by far the most welcoming and “easygoing” institution I have visited is the Herrick Library.

Perhaps the greatest difference between working in my archives and American, or even those dedicated to (the former West- and reunified) Germany, is a greater degree of access for scholars of the media. It is perhaps paradoxical that the doors are metaphorically wide open on the archival treasure of a former authoritarian state. These documents are wide ranging and include written sources (program documents and viewer correspondence for example), film and videocassettes, an archive of press clippings that dates to the socialist period, a photo library, a library of secondary sources and, increasingly, online documentation/exhibits. Because there was just one television network (1952-1991) with two channels (1969-1991) operated by the same agency, all

¹ I am an historian who began working with the audiovisual past as a Ph.D. student interested in the role television played in shaping German identities during the Cold War. I recently published [Envisioning Socialism: Television and the Cold War in the German Democratic Republic](#) Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014.

the sources are centralized in one building in [Berlin-Babelsberg](#). It is a very large collection, including even television in the period before recording was possible (1952-1962), mostly due to the political situation of the Cold War. Germans in West and East kinescoped each other's television and transcribed it, expecting to find "what it was like" on the other side of the border. After reunification these legacies were archived in their respective branches of the DRA. The "defeat" of socialism left no real incentive to hide or hold back any of these sources and, in the early post-socialist world, the sources were not considered "proprietary" in any sense, making access to them more likely.²

The large trove of sources has its difficulties as well. There is so much material that much of it remains "not yet available" for study – indeed no one really knows what's in there.³ There are probably a number of "lost" materials; that is, materials that were destroyed, more likely through neglect than malice, as the service unraveled in 1991 (after a brief effort to stay alive in the post-socialist German media landscape). There are also pockets of other materials held in private hands by those who worked for the former television service. It is unclear what will happen to these when that generation passes. How this archive can be made more publicly accessible is a question as well. TV exhibits at local museums have been poorly conceived: one such exhibit at the DDR Museum on the Spree included nothing but short clips of titles/theme music of beloved series. The DRA historically has very successfully kept clips of East German shows off of [YouTube](#), citing copyright infringement. There is nothing like the (very exceptional) effort of the [French National Audiovisual Archive](#) to preserve its audiovisual heritage – and make it accessible – digitally.

Finally, there is the problem of the interpretive value of the sources we find. In the early days of my work, lay people and scholars alike conceived GDR television as an essential tool of the authoritarian state, a perspective that owed much to the work of communications scholars in the early Cold War. That is, work by television studies scholars that brought us a much more nuanced view of television and its role in society has, until recently, made few inroads into approaches to socialist television. It is all too easy to get caught up in the narratives that Anglo-American television studies tell about the past. We need to interrogate our own assumptions about the intention, origin and uses of the sources we examine, and we need to make those arguments to our readers as well.

² The programs of the DFF seemed to hold little value in the capitalist media marketplace. This changed in the early aughts, when demand for clips from shows for documentaries about the past, museum exhibitions, and "reruns" on television channels in the geographic area of the former GDR raised their value.

³ There is a finding aid for the DRA that is helpful, but does not include a significant portion of the collection that archivists have not yet worked through.