From Propaganda to Modernization: Media Policy and Media Audiences under National Socialism

Clemens Zimmermann (Saarland University)

I: The National Socialist Media System: The Role of Goebbels

Contemporary observers were the first to draw attention to the all-embracing, systematic and sophisticated nature of the media institutions of the National Socialists. A perceptive and astonishingly well informed study by Derrick Sington and Arthur Weidenfeld was published as early as 1942, though it was not picked up by German scholars after the war. For the two journalists (who were employed in the listening service of the BBC), the ‘intensive use of propaganda as a weapon of political warfare and mass influence’ was a ‘psychological experiment carried out on the minds of millions’ and an ‘experiment in organization’. The experiment consisted in the creation of a gigantic ‘machine’, comprising the party apparatus, which provided the energy source, the party’s own press, the role of which was becoming ever more significant, and the Propaganda Ministry, which was the ‘motor of the whole German propaganda machine’.

It seemed clear, then, in this first comprehensive analysis, and has been argued in countless studies since, that the National Socialist media system was organized from top down and that its purpose—like that of the National Socialist system in general, over-organized and intent on controlling and including every aspect of society—was to monitor and regulate information and the machinery of influence over the emotions of the masses. The National Socialists themselves had developed a rudimentary theory of the way in which the masses were to be influenced. Subsequent studies have described how the registration of everyone who was active in the media, the use of an employment policy rich in rewards and punishments, and the repression of those who refused to conform made up the central pillars of a totalitarian media system that was historically unprecedented and may perhaps even be termed revolutionary. By establishing at the very outset, in 1933, a Ministry

---

of Public Information and Propaganda, the roots of which lay in the experiences and analogous institutions of the First World War, the régime gave an unambiguous sign of its ambition to exert power over the media. There was to be no doubt that it was determined to translate this ambition into practice.

Fairly soon, however, historians began to modify this image of a perfectly functioning machine, or at least of a machine that resorted to compulsion whenever it was unable to achieve popular consent. From the 1970s onwards, scholars became noticeably more discriminating and critical when assessing quite how sophisticated the National Socialist propaganda apparatus really was. Studies by German historians paid particular attention to the realm of press policy. Goebbels was never able to fully integrate Otto Dietrich, the Reich Chief of Press, into the Propaganda Ministry as a State Secretary, while the Wehrmacht, Goebbels and Ribbentrop were constantly in competition with one another in the field of ‘foreign propaganda’. These accounts of friction and faction, personal rivalry and obstructionism, not just at ministerial level but at all strata of party organization, together with analyses of competition amongst the different media themselves, formed part and parcel of the more general debate about the so-called ‘polycratic’ nature of the National Socialist system.

As well as the ‘systemic’ view of National Socialist media policy, another approach that was first taken by contemporaries was to place primary emphasis on the role of Goebbels’s demonic image and personality. There is no doubting Goebbels’s organizational skills and professional competence, nor his boundless desire for power and the ruthlessness with which he pursued the destruction of the Jews. However, as well as directing the party’s propaganda activities, he also immersed himself as a minister in the highly complex fields of the arts and the wider media, and in terms of cultural policy he espoused (in comparison with Rosenberg) a progressive and ‘modern’ outlook. Goebbels was at one and the same time husband and lover, party activist and statesman, Jew-hater and art-lover: he was also a relatively efficient manager of the new media of film and broadcasting which formed the linchpins of his media policy.

II: ‘Propaganda’ as the Key Concept of Earlier Media-Oriented Analyses of the National Socialist System

At the heart of both these approaches—an emphasis on the figure of Goebbels and on the totalitarian nature of the National Socialist media system—was an...
assumption that the content of the media under National Socialism should be seen entirely as the product of a deliberate project to influence the thinking of the masses. On this assumption, the abiding purpose of the media was to inculcate National Socialist ideology into the hearts and minds of the German people: an ideology consisting of key Nazi principles and slogans such as that of the superiority of the Germanic race; the Führerstaat; the virtues of German culture; the importance of dealing ruthlessly with ‘enemies’; the factitious Volksgemeinschaft or ‘national community’ (at once a racist construction and a scheme for social harmony); and the training of the younger generation into iron-hard Spartans devoted to sport rather than learning. In wartime, more specifically, and in connection with terror measures, the purpose of propaganda via the mass media was to announce particular measures that were being taken, provide a justification for them, and create support for them within public opinion, to which great heed had to be paid. The overriding objective of propaganda was to win approval for the bellicose policy that was pursued up to 1939 and to strengthen morale after the war had started: in other words, to generate popular loyalty to the régime.

‘Propaganda’ was one of the principal positive terms which the NSDAP used when describing itself. It employed the word solely in reference to its own activities, distinguishing it from Werbung (publicity), Überredung (persuasion) and Reklame (advertising); in turn, the propaganda put out by enemies was Hetze (agitation). However, Goebbels’s insistent claims regarding the power of his own propaganda, together with the characteristic methods he used, have misled later generations of historians into believing, likewise, that the propaganda was effective, and into placing primary emphasis on the media as a system of persuasion—a misconception which persists today. Moreover, propaganda was an international phenomenon, which permeated public life in many other countries, though most especially the Soviet Union, Italy, Spain, and other totalitarian and authoritarian states. Because the National Socialists operated on the basis that nothing that emanated from the media of an ‘enemy’ was free of propaganda, they constantly had to respond to the manoeuvres of, and stories presented by, the other side. The result, though, was the creation of media realms that were remote from the world in which most of the population lived. This did little to add to the propaganda’s credibility.

Historians have gradually reined back from the notion of National Socialist propaganda as an all-pervading presence and a super-efficient tool for manipulating popular attitudes and ideas.

In the first place, it has been realized that the real task in the study of propaganda is not to expose obvious lies, distortions and manipulative devices, but to examine the subliminal messages that are being conveyed. This latter challenge, though, poses much greater methodological difficulties.

Second, it has become clear, in the case both of the National Socialists' constant staging of quasi-theatrical media events and of their use of the modern
mass-audience media, that what is important is not only the message content that was conveyed but also the central function that these events and media performed within the process of communication in society. In his discussion of ceremonies, cults and propaganda Ulrich Thamer more or less takes as read the highly sophisticated nature of National Socialist ‘propaganda’, arguing his case with reference to the Nuremberg rallies and the Olympic Games—major events which have since become iconic. We also need to consider, however, the role of the countless far smaller media events that took place at the local level. The jubilee ceremonies and annual festivals that were held in the provinces—marches, parades, ceremonies in workplaces and schools, in towns and in the countryside—seemed to create a permanent climate of propaganda and mass integration. The question arises: did all this activity perhaps generate a certain degree of fatigue? Indeed, were individuals, while putting on a public face, perhaps also pursuing other, quite private goals, such as boosting their careers locally or simply enjoying one another’s company?

Recent research into these ceremonies has shown that nationalist, ‘racial’ and völkisch constructions of identity were paralleled by traditional, local elements.

Third, there is the question whether propaganda—irrespective of ways in which it may have shaped behaviour in the short term—was effective in the longer run, seeing that it posed a challenge to people’s fundamental values and that manipulative accounts of events were at odds with people’s actual experience as transmitted by word of mouth and communicated within families and friendship groups. Private media, too, such as letters, generated a flood of information that differed sharply from reports which appeared in the public media—a fact of which the system itself was aware.

The control that was exerted over the media and their employees, and to a large extent over the media’s content, caused a further problem which Goebbels clearly recognized but which was never resolved. The regulation of the political content of the media—the tight grip that was kept on artistic and political discourse and the policing of the public sphere—led to a high degree of uniformity, which in turn made the public bored, certainly as far as its response to newspapers was concerned. As the papers became duller, so their overall political effectiveness declined.

Ian Kershaw came to the conclusion back in 1983 that National Socialist propaganda activity before 1939 was successful only in the sense that it secured the German people’s approval for the régime’s conduct of foreign

7 N. Frei, Nationalsozialistische Eroberung der Provinzepresse (Stuttgart, 1980).
policy up to that time: it had not managed to generate enthusiasm for war. And after 1942, above all, it failed to sustain the will to continue the struggle. That is not the whole story, though. Perhaps the greatest achievement of Goebbels’s propaganda was that it repeatedly managed to come up with ‘little somethings’: it was forever passing judgements on new topics and freshly launched schemes. In other words, it set the agenda. On the other hand, how much of this stuck, and what lasting effect it had on people’s behaviour, must, as we have indicated, be assessed in specific contexts. Certainly, for example, we can see a connection between the success of the film Jud Süss and acceptance of the persecution of the Jews: but it is possible that the film was merely a reflection of widespread pre-existent anti-Semitic prejudice.

Goebbels himself always insisted that the media should not be saturated with overt political messages and sloganizing. In the case of films, ‘art’ was accordingly granted a certain degree of autonomy, in contrast with agitation. Gerd Albrecht’s drily statistical survey showed that the number of overtly political films that were produced made up a very small proportion of the whole (the latter comprising 1094 titles, by his count). Admittedly, Stephen Lowry, among others, has criticized this general assessment, on the grounds that Albrecht did not provide analyses of individual films and did not show whether or not there was any latent political content, or what the precise nature of this content might be. Analyses of this kind have since been made, most of them concentrating on films that are likely to have had a subliminal effect, such as costume dramas. Researchers have also established that roughly 80% of the titles were in fact unremarkable light-entertainment vehicles. These, indeed, are shown on present-day German regional television. They were genre films, comedies (such as Die Feuerzangenbowle) and musicals, and their main purpose was to entertain, and only marginally to provide role models.

If films had a function in stabilizing the system, they performed it by being a branch of entertainment, not by virtue of their subject matter. From the late 1930s onwards there was a growing demand for variety in the cinema: people wanted to be carried away into different worlds, to indulge hidden fantasies. (The main, very real problem was that the film industry could not fully satisfy this demand, even by importing and dubbing foreign productions.) The experiential space created by the film medium provided psychological support, enabling the individual to ‘survive’ and retain a private life even under the...

---

11 K. Witte, Lachende Erben, toller Tag: Filmkomödie im Dritten Reich (Berlin, 1995).
constraints of wartime. The system was, therefore, stabilized; at the same time, though, the individual was subjectively strengthened. Cinema, and conversations and newspaper articles about cinema, showed that there were worlds elsewhere. Films closely matched popular expectations of roles and subject-matter, and if they thereby preserved the very dubious façade of a civil society, they also served to strengthen personal judgement. The term ‘distraction’ does not do justice to the full complexity of the situation.

The higher-quality films were rarely the product of simple commissions. Directors had a certain degree of freedom with regard to subject-matter and the production process, although the Film Minister increasingly intervened in order to inject political bias. Censorship and banning were used as a last resort: directors operated self-censorship, or designed their projects in such a way that they could not be accused of disloyalty. Filmic aesthetic criteria continued to operate, in part because German films were distributed internationally and because of the competition from Hollywood. The result was a wide spectrum of artistic and political points of view, ranging from highly political action films such as Stukas to Detlef Sierck’s Zu Neuen Ufern and La Habanera, which, though they cannot be termed subversive, were certainly imbued with ambiguity and irony. Helmut Käutner’s films are regarded today as examples of ‘artistic opposition’.12 his Romanze in Moll has a multi-layered narrative structure and portrays the destructive effect of social norms. Veit Harlan’s melodramatic Immensee, thematically comparable, ends with the victory of duty over personal desires: a message in tune with wartime conditions. Rolf Hansen’s Die große Liebe, starring Zarah Leander, was a musical-cum-melodrama that could be straightforwardly enjoyed as such, the story line conveying that women should wait patiently, likewise doing their duty.13 And there were many hundreds of other light-entertainment titles, now worth studying only for the way in which they reveal structural features of the relevant genres rather than as works in their own right.

Historians, then, have considerably modified, if not deconstructed, the earlier paradigm, according to which propaganda was the be-all and end-all of the media system. Some later studies, indeed, have gone further still, posing the controversial question whether propaganda was actually necessary in order to persuade the German population to support the National Socialist

system. On this view, anti-Semitic attitudes in particular were already so strong that the media merely reinforced and channelled them. However we answer that particular question, we certainly have to ask how decisive a role was played by the staging of media events and by the media system overall, as against the régime’s socio-political achievements—some of which, after all, were genuine and attractive (such as the provision of holidays, the expansion of social insurance, wage rises in real terms and some precursors of the consumer society)—and the promise of a new *Volksgemeinschaft*. In addition, the greater the emphasis that is placed on the fact that the German people found itself entangled in the relationship with the National Socialists after the outbreak of war and the start of the policy of extermination in eastern Europe, the less significant the media system and the role of propaganda become. It is plausible to argue, at least, that the population, including that section of it that was against war on principle, wished to ascribe some meaning to the resultant casualties, and that this explains, in part, the doggedness with which people stuck by the régime. Kershaw and other historians have seen the ‘Hitler myth’ as a prime symbolic factor making for integration. The myth had to be propagated—like a ‘brand’—by intensive multi-media campaigns: through the use of posters, pictures in magazines, newsreels, speeches by the *Führer* and quasi-devotional objects. When the fortunes of war turned against Germany, it was soon in trouble.

All in all, then, what is important is to investigate the way in which the media functioned, especially as regards their shifting relations with the attitudes and reactions of the audiences they were addressing.

At the time, in Germany itself, there were two kinds of approach to the study of the role of the media. The first comprised academic projects, notably those conducted by a group of researchers under Hanns A. Münster in Leipzig, who examined the growth of different kinds of media, media use and the reception of media content, primarily through fieldwork in workplaces and local communities. These studies did not make much headway (the same was true of institutionalized opinion research), partly because of academic rivalries, and partly because of a lack of interest at the Propaganda Ministry, where officials conducted their own surveys and where, in any case, the minister tended to rely on his own judgement. In general, empirical sociological research remained less advanced than in the United States (though there was...
some progress in consumer research). In America new empirical methods were being developed, but Germans were more inhibited in answering questionnaires about the content of the media than were people living under a democratic system. All the same, the findings of the Leipzig group are of interest and, if allowance is made for the premisses on which they rested, remain of value to the historian.\(^{19}\) The second approach formed part of the systematic surveying of public opinion that was carried out by the Sicherheitsdienst (SD—security service) of the SS on central questions of policy and the conduct of the war: specifically, the SD's surveys on the functioning and social reception of the media themselves and on people's assessment of individual media products. Edited selections of these surveys are available in Meldungen aus dem Reich.\(^{20}\)

Studies of media representations under National Socialism\(^{21}\) make the point that a basic distinction needs to be made between the contents produced by media and their reception. At the heart of modern thinking on the subject is the idea that those receiving media contents are constantly performing acts of decoding, and that these decodings differ from one individual to another in accordance with their cultural and social reference-points, educational background, sex, age and previous life-experience. Inner resistance to the contents of what is received may be of great importance. This resistance is determined, \textit{inter alia}, by an individual’s assessment of the status of those communicating (in broadcasting, for example, announcers and journalists), the credibility of the entire media system and of the different media within it, and the individual’s personal interactions at the microsocial level with groups that serve as his/her primary opinion-formers. Plainly, mass communications media provide people with a large quantity of information that is relevant to them, albeit while adding specific emotional colourings. People's attitudes, however, are shaped and altered far more through interpersonal communication than directly through mass communication. It is rarely possible to shift attitudes if these are the reflection of deep-seated desires and values. Moreover, people tend to agree with whatever is the majority opinion.\(^{22}\) On the other hand, the media can set the agenda with regard to issues on which great uncertainty exists, and they can confirm attitudes that are already established. That form of influence, at least, was certainly exerted by the politically oriented media under National Socialism as the régime strove to restrict the realm of discourse through terror.


\(^{22}\) H. Bonfadelli, \textit{Medienwirkungsforschung I: Grundlagen und theoretische Perspektiven} (Constance, 1999).
III: Media Reception in the Years 1938–1940: Meldungen aus dem Reich

This section discusses the mixed character of popular reaction to news stories and programmes broadcast on the radio during the years 1938 to 1940. In this period the German people were, first, beset with uncertainty about the war that was about to break out and then gripped with euphoria after the initial victories of the Blitzkrieg. The first major bombardments had yet to occur and there was still a belief that there would be few casualties and that speedy victory was assured. The Meldungen aus dem Reich (Reports from the Reich) for this period are an illuminating source about politically relevant popular attitudes and the influence of the media. 23 They show that radio was hugely important, both in its function as a medium of light entertainment and as a transmitter of topical information about the war. It was pre-eminently a ‘mood’ medium, both in the sense that it adapted itself to changes in public feeling and that listeners’ assessments of radio output and their interest in political broadcasts varied in accordance with the collective state of mind. In turn, these changes of mood were primarily determined by the vicissitudes of the war. If the war was going well, chauvinistic assessments predominated among listeners and the broadcasting medium was also positively valued for its function as a source of information. If the situation was precarious, criticism of the medium itself mounted, and of its news programmes in particular.

As radio was extremely popular in general, the widespread complaints about shortages of receivers, batteries and spare parts and about poor signal quality were understandable enough; further grounds for criticism included the constant changes of places of transmission, interference from foreign stations and broadcasting times that did not fit into the rhythm of daily life. 24 Some particular broadcasts were commended, such as Hans Fritzsche’s polemical Zeitungs- und Rundfunkschau, morale-boosting and inspiring speeches by Hitler and Goebbels and, especially, the very popular music-request programmes for the armed forces. 25 Radio plays on political and historical subjects aroused considerable interest in the context of the general

23 Gerhard Stahr makes extensive use of this material, while taking a critical view of it: G. Stahr, Volksgemeinschaft vor der Leinwand? Der nationalsozialistische Film und sein Publikum (Berlin, 2001), pp. 43–48, 203, 271.
26 H.-J. Koch, Das Wunschkonzert im NS-Rundfunk (Cologne, 2003); M. Pater, ‘Rundfunkangebote in Marßolek und von Saldern (eds), Zuhören und Gehörtwerden, pp. 224–38.
politicization that set in after the outbreak of war, as did plays with relevance to contemporary concerns, for example about the history and current state of the western powers. That said, plays gave rise to a wide range of responses. Rural listeners either were uninterested in radio plays or found the broadcast times unsuitable; urban workers were very interested, though they wanted the plays to be preceded by explanatory introductions; members of the middle class felt encouraged and validated by them; intellectuals and the educated middle class criticized them for their lack of historical objectivity and their excessive political bias. The latter group also found fault with comic styles of presentation, though these were typical of what had long since been an entertainment-based medium, rather than the educational tool that had been envisaged when a broadcasting service had first been established.27

In fact, except for a highly political phase in 1939, the light-entertainment character of radio broadcasting became ever more pronounced, in explicit accordance with popular demand. Goebbels himself called for ‘consideration [to be given], in particular, to entertainment and relaxation’, simply in order that listeners should be kept loyal to the medium.28 At the same time, many humorous programmes were dotted with stale racist references. The desire for more light entertainment and light music, as well as military songs and popular concerts, was widespread. There were calls for such music to be played in air-raid shelters,29 and after the first bombings in the Ruhr a rise in the output of cheerful music seems to have led to a ‘strong [increase in] the psychological readiness for work’.30 Demands for more dance music grew in 1940, with some listeners even arguing that this would be a way of reducing the number of people who were tuning in to foreign music programmes. A majority, however, was firmly opposed to music that was too close to jazz.31 Soldiers, on the other hand, were equally hostile to kitschy programmes such as Gruß aus der Heimat.32 The new format of Bunte Abende (evening variety shows) was especially commended,33 one example being a two-hour programme ‘Two hours of variety—something for everyone’ that was broadcast in October 1940.34 In the request programme for the armed forces broadcast on 15 December 1940 the ‘looser programme sequence, evidently devised with pleasure’, went down well.35 This sort of family programme, with a live appeal—which remained popular in the 1950s—attracted ‘the highest possible

27 MadR 4, 1940, pp. 1142–43.
29 MadR 4, 1940, pp. 952, 1117–18, 1322; 5, 1940, pp. 1553, 1576.
31 MadR 6, 1940, p. 1776.
32 MadR 5, 1940, 1585.
33 MadR 5, 1940, pp. 1740–41.
34 MadR 6, 1940, p. 1879.
range of ages and classes [as well as] both sexes and was a link between families and troops in the field.35

Respondents repeatedly confirmed the breadth and credibility of what was on the radio and expressed their understanding of the need for restrictions because of the war.36 The campaign in the west generated a desire for information and background reports, enabling people to feel that the situation had been explained to them. Given the existence of such expectations, however, the actual content of the broadcasts inevitably fell short, and some broadcasts left listeners positively uneasy. Brief comments about the content or timing of programmes could quickly cause rumours to spread.37 Reports from the front line were of great general interest (older men and soldiers listened to them particularly) and were valued precisely because they were topical. There were also suspicions, however, that they were produced in the studio and not from the battlefield—in other words, that they were faked—and this induced both boredom and unease as war-weariness developed (after the cease-fire of 2 June 1940).38 Feelings of aversion at the excessive quantity and monotony of political broadcasts were noted immediately after the campaigns in the west, when ‘nothing [was] going on’ and the expected attack on Britain did not materialize. When the attack did start, in September/October 1940, a gradual improvement in mood became apparent, together with a clear revival of interest in news broadcasts.39

There were differences of view among the radio audience whether facts should be reported in an open, down-to-earth manner, even in cases of bad news such as bombings or unsuccessful battles,40 or whether commentary, both factual and ironic, should be used more widely as a presentational device, and rumours that were in circulation should be explicitly rebutted.41 It seems to have been widely accepted that the media as a whole were subject to propaganda influence. On the one hand, people believed that they could see through the mechanisms whereby this influence was being exerted; on the other, they continued to trust what they heard. Less educated groups actually wanted a more uniform style of presentation, offering firm conclusions and banishing uncertainties and inconsistencies: they wanted, in fact, more propaganda.42

37 MadR 3, 1939, p. 690; 4, 1940, pp. 1074, 1166, 1218, 1237; 5, 1940, pp. 1493–94, 1585, 1633, 1690.
38 MadR 4, 1940, pp. 952, 1151–54, 1219; 5, 1940, 1577, 1645–49, 1690.
40 MadR 4, 1940, pp. 1151–54; 5, 1940, pp. 1451, 1470, 1552–53, 1572, 1625.
41 MadR 4, 1940, pp. 1263–66.
Yet when the air war against Britain failed to make progress, the inconsistencies within the propaganda, and the propaganda itself, came in for criticism.

The most sensitive aspect of broadcasting policy concerned the listening bans. It is reckoned that roughly half of those who had a radio (and in 1941, that meant two-thirds of all households) were *Schwarzhörer*: they listened to forbidden broadcasts. It was especially people who used the radio primarily for information purposes (on the whole, the better educated) who wanted to form their own picture of the situation. When they felt that they were not being kept well informed—as was the case with the American presidential election in October 1940, for example—they tuned in to foreign radio stations. In particular, Beromünster radio in Switzerland, the BBC and Radio Luxemburg not only broadcast German-language news bulletins but provided reports on missing German servicemen and gave a platform to exiles. When German stations broadcast foreign-language news programmes, or were closed down in the evenings for military reasons, German listeners increasingly turned to foreign broadcasts.

The penalties for listening to illicit radio stations were very threatening, some of them draconian, and were a cause for fear—mainly because of the threat of denunciation, since the Gestapo was unable to conduct a comprehensive programme of observation. In fact, however, in many ways the scope and application of the listening ban were unclear, or at any rate people interpreted it less rigorously in order to justify their own practice as listeners. Even radios in *Gaststätten* played foreign radio stations; after the campaign in the west the listening ban was seen as unnecessary. All of this shows that German listeners expected to be kept correctly informed about the course of the war and, when this was plainly not happening, found alternative sources of news for themselves.

The *Meldungen aus dem Reich* also reveal people’s attitudes to the media system as such. The press and broadcasting had become established in people’s minds as the components of the system by about 1940. They were seen as complementary media, distinguished above all in terms of their topicality. The fact that the radio service was able to broadcast the decisive moments of the cease-fire negotiations after the fall of France was hailed as a major achievement. There was an expectation, however, that radio would continue

---

43 MadR 5, 1940, pp. 1607–08, 1645–49.
to pull off this sort of reporting feat (as well as providing morale-boosting entertainment and giving a rhythm to people’s day). Expectations were also affected by the fact that during the last years of the Weimar Republic and the prewar years of National Socialism, although the autonomy of the regional radio stations had been first reduced and then abolished, the range of slots for regional broadcasting had been very wide. There was strong criticism of the general cutback in broadcasting hours and programme variety after 1938, when a policy of Zusammenschaltung (centralization of broadcasting) was introduced; few respondents expressed themselves in favour. In November 1940, for example, regrets were voiced in western Germany that broadcasts produced by the separate stations within the national network had dwindled to a handful. The fact that the stations in Stuttgart, Cologne and Saarbrücken were, at least, able to transmit their own programmes in the mornings, particularly on local history and the like, was welcomed. There was an assumption, in other words, that radio would take notice of regional identities and experience.

IV: The Media as Modern: Modernization Through the Media

During the 1990s persuasive arguments were put forward against the thesis that the National Socialist system had been a modernizing one. Among the factors emphasized were the violent nature of the régime, the fact that both its basic purpose and its practice were directed towards expansion and genocide; the role it accorded to reactionary utopias and ideologies; the way in which its policies were improvised and geared towards instant success rather than fundamental change; the gulf between rhetoric and reality in its social policies and the implementation of the Volksgemeinschaft; and, of course, its racism. It was argued further that the concept of modernization is not a neutral one, but is intrinsic to the western developmental model of democratization and pluralism. In turn, however, this normative conception of modernization has also been criticized. Without suggesting that the National Socialist system was, unambiguously and overall, a successful modernizing régime, or that National Socialism was a paradigmatic era in the history of modernity, we can nevertheless recognize that it brought about abrupt breaches with tradition, accelerated the process of industrialization and diminished the importance of traditional social milieux by promoting urbanization and extending the role of the communications media: in other words, that it forced the pace of modernization in important areas of German society.

At the same time, though, there is no denying that it did so in a highly inconsistent way: in the realm of health, for example, while it improved general

46 MadR 4, 1940, pp. 1277–81, 1309; 5, 1940, pp. 1354–56.
47 MadR 2, 1939, p. 375; 4, 1940, p. 1118; 5, 1940, p. 1493; 5, 1940, p. 1539.
48 MadR 6, 1940, pp. 1788–89.
public health standards, it was also responsible for 60,000 compulsory sterilizations. For this reason some participants in the historical debate have had recourse to deliberately ambivalent terms to describe the régime, such as ‘reactionary modernism’, autochthonous modernity and ‘feigned modernization’. Riccardo Bavaj has pointed out, too, that a sharp distinction needs to be drawn between ‘modernizing effects of, and modern elements in, National Socialism’.

The media under National Socialism displayed several features that may be regarded as generally indicative of modernization:

First, the steady expansion of modern visual media and the huge expansion of radio broadcasting. This growth went hand in hand with a strong focus on consumer needs and people’s desire for entertainment, and with the first signs of moves towards links between the different media, for example between film and books and magazines and between radio and film.

Second, a great increase in the efficiency and effectiveness of the mass media as a system, in comparison with the Weimar era. There were significant processes of professionalization within the media, and a new realm of communication and experience created by the mass media became firmly established. This realm, bringing together areas of society that had previously been separate, was non-political and served to stabilize the system.

Third, a far greater interaction, in comparison with earlier periods, between the media system, particularly the cinema and radio, and other realms of experience: consumption, political ceremonies, leisure, fashion, commercialized sport, the cult of stardom and major ‘events’. In other words, popular culture was transformed under the influence of the media.

54 Koch, Das Wunschkonzert im NS-Rundfunk, pp. 241–46.
Fourth, the independent role played by people's tastes and preferences in the face of the media's offerings.58

As well as these indicators of modernization, there were features that were specific to the National Socialist system. These included the ‘connection between the industrial perfection and psychologically masked destructiveness’ of media representations,59 and the fact that media modernity (the cult of stardom, enthusiasm for technology, the imitation of American models and so on) went hand in hand with fantasies such as that of an organic Volksgemeinschaft—a unique alliance in historical terms.60 We should also mention the important point that selective censorship co-existed with ‘limitations on bureaucratic control where majority-group interests were concerned’.61

One of the reasons why Goebbels promoted the development of the audiovisual media was to level out the differences between—indeed, to break up—traditional philosophico-religious, social and cultural milieux. It is clear, however, that despite all the genuinely modernizing features we have listed, in many ways the purposes for which they were intended were not achieved, but were thwarted by technological and economic pressures, established attitudes and culturally transmitted values. In the remainder of this article we shall examine the successes and failures of the policy of media modernization with reference to two areas: the introduction of the Volksempfänger (the ‘people’s wireless set’) and the attempt to open up rural communities through the media. The rural population made up one-third of the population of Germany as a whole. The régime had no choice but to seek to mobilize it politically, not only in order to secure the nation's food supplies. It was also important to extend notions of meritocracy and consumerism into the rural sector, and to reshape deep-rooted and predominantly religious-based moral values, thereby strengthening local National Socialist power bases and ideological influence. This was all the more crucial as the régime’s agricultural policies were creating greater pressure on rural areas because of the priority being given to industrial interests, arms manufacturers and consumers.

V: The Volksempfänger

Both in popular memory and in the academic literature, one of the abiding symbols of the ever-growing presence of party propaganda in everyday life

59 Schäfer, Das gespaltene Bewusstsein, p. 145.
61 Schäfer, Das gespaltene Bewusstsein, p. 171.
inside and outside the home has been the ‘people’s wireless set’. The *Volksempfänger* sold at first for 76 marks, then for 65 marks—a relatively cheap item, though by no means affordable by all. In 1933 there were still marked disparities in household ownership of radios, evident both between social classes and between town and country. The aim of National Socialist broadcasting policy was to pressure a highly reluctant industry into producing huge numbers of cheap radio sets and so expand the scope of radio ownership. The *Volksempfänger* VE 301, produced in 1933, was a simple, standardized, mass-produced set. Nearly three and a half million of them were sold, with a huge initial surge of purchases between 1933 and 1935, though there was a sharp tailing-off thereafter. The radio picked up the central German broadcasting service, and also foreign stations, though there was considerable interference and not all parts of the country could obtain a signal. Despite some minor commercial hiccups, retailers went fairly enthusiastically about selling the sets. The radio industry, by contrast, publicly sought to disparage the new product that had been imposed upon it (even though the price of the VE 301 more or less covered its production costs), preferring to boost sales of their own more expensive models. The *Deutscher Kleinempfänger* that was marketed later, more cheaply still at 34 marks, had sales of a million. It was of a similar technical standard to the *Volksempfänger* and could also pick up some foreign stations. It may seem, therefore, that the rise in numbers of radio listeners (to 9.1 million in 1938–39) and the increase in radio ownership among manual workers and rural groups was simply the consequence of the arrival of these standardized ‘political’ types of radio set, together with the broadcasting of special programmes directed specifically at those target groups and the deployment of massive advertising. In fact, though, during the same period millions of older sets were replaced by better and more luxurious brands. In 1938–39, out of 3 million radio sets sold, one million were technically superior ‘superhet’ receivers, which provided much better reception of distant stations than the *Volksempfänger* and other older models. Significantly, the new sets were described as *Weltempfänger* (literally, ‘world receivers’) or as ‘world class’: according to one sales slogan, they ‘united Europe and the world’.

Between 1933 and 1939, then (and later, too, insofar as production was able to continue), not only were *Volksempfänger* being sold but technological modernization was also taking place, with a growth in the range of private

---


radio sets available. The latter phenomenon was a consequence both of advertising campaigns that consistently promoted a vision of a leisure society and of an increase in mass purchasing power. The campaign on behalf of the Volksmp"a\"nger, in other words, helped open up an area of the consumer market which would have been reached in due course by means of commercial advertising. The proportion of radio listeners per 100 households rose from 25.4% in 1933 to 65.1% in 1941: inclusive of radio listening with neighbours and community listening, coverage by the medium had increased sharply both in an absolute sense and in terms of social class. Problems that were encountered in the countryside will be dealt with in the sections that follow.

VI: The Countryside: Cultural Modernization and Use of the Media

Clearly, despite all the solstice ceremonies, not to mention the great obstacles that were encountered in the attempt to mechanize agricultural production, technological and socio-cultural modernization continued in village communities under National Socialism: indeed, the apparatus of party and state served to promote it on a huge scale. At the same time, however, there were tensions between Goebbels and the peasantry regarding the role of the media vis-\`a-vis the countryside, the peasantry fearing that the effect of the growth of the media would be to accelerate the 'flight from the land' and induce more agricultural workers to migrate into the cities.

As the (rearmament-led) boom got under way, and the unwelcome migration from the countryside continued, it was inevitable that electrification and the growth of motor traffic (for example, through the increased use of motorcycles) had an effect on what had previously been the distinctive cultural position of the village. An empirical study of the small Catholic peasant village of Sulzthal near Bad Kissingen, conducted at the time, described the new situation that was being created by the tensions between the Bauernstand (the peasantry) and the Volksgemeinschaft and between the existing village culture and the new urbanized models of leisure and media. The study (the author of which voices his disappointment at many of his own findings) emphasizes the steadily increasing role of external influences, in the form of the growth of the role of the media and in geographical mobility that had taken place during the 1930s. On the one hand, stubbornly parochial forms of...


behaviour, unwelcome to the National Socialists, persisted in Sulzthal. Simultaneously, however, modern tendencies towards pluralism in behaviour and individualism in consumer attitudes were becoming apparent, and this could only be seen as politically ambivalent. Traditional local forms of sociability were giving way with astonishing speed to leisure activities sponsored by the various party organizations. Young people, in particular, were making use of the new, inexpensive opportunities that were now available, such as Kraft durch Freude excursions and the cinema. As incomes rose and unemployment fell, people could once more travel to celebrations and ceremonies in neighbouring villages. All of this had the effect of gradually sidelining the traditional village culture.

Radio ownership, newspaper readership and film attendance were less widespread in the countryside than in the towns (though the differences were less great than is sometimes supposed). There were several reasons for the disparity: first, towns had always, historically, been the motors of growth of media audiences; second, the countryside, especially in eastern Germany, lacked the relevant forms of infrastructure, principally because of lower population density and the relatively higher cost of infrastructural development; third, incomes in rural areas were lower and people preferred to spend their money in other ways; fourth, leisure patterns were different, because of seasonal influences, longer working hours and distinctive rhythms of work; and fifth, the proportion of the population that was resistant to the media in the early 1930s (older people, especially) seems to have been higher in the countryside than in the towns.

On the evenings of working days villagers would sit down together over a game of cards. According to one informant, ‘all the village news is discussed, and now and then people talk about the most important things that are going on in the outside world’. According to another, ‘the economy, politics, world affairs—they all reach the villages very quickly these days, and give the people who are receptive to such things enough to talk about’. The reality was that by the end of the 1930s public opinion in villages was far more heavily influenced than before by information and ideas transmitted through the media. Together with the Sulzthal study, the study of the village of ‘Thürungen’ conducted by the Leipzig group (mentioned above) gives us a detailed picture of the use and reception of media in the countryside.

In Sulzthal 52 families (out of 178) subscribed to daily newspapers. Religious, weekly and monthly magazines, on the other hand, which contained regional family news and articles of both an edifying and entertaining nature, were read in 150 households. As in the population generally, men read mainly the articles on ‘politics, economics and local history and geography, while women, in so far as they picked up the newspaper at all, [read], especially, the short

---

67 Ibid., pp. 105–11; for the quotations, see p. 121.
stories and novels as well as the articles of local interest’. The increase in the number of media offerings, however, did not of itself lead to a more intensive use of the media or cause them to be more influential. The specialist magazines that came with compulsory membership of National Socialist associations were read only ‘superficially’, if at all. Specialist farming magazines were bought in large numbers but did not produce any noticeable improvement in people’s knowledge of agricultural questions.  

In Thürungen there was a considerably greater use of media than in Sulzthal. Here, 68 out of 91 households took at least one daily newspaper and some took more than one. Most of the households that did not take a newspaper owned a radio and also had some other means of access to a copy of a newspaper. Among the 23 households where no paper was taken, all except nine either intended to resume taking a newspaper when their personal financial situation improved, or saw a newspaper at the home of parents or friends. The study showed that altogether, about 90% of the adults in the village read a newspaper (either their own or someone else’s), and that of these 90%, three-quarters read a paper regularly. Of the others, some read very occasionally, some rather more frequently, but none regularly. As a rule, those questioned in the survey regarded both forms of medium—newspapers and broadcasting—as important. It was apparent that the uniquely distinguishing feature of the newspaper, namely that it was (as today) a comprehensive transmitter of local and regional news, was also the feature that had most bearing on readers’ preferences. Eighty-five per cent of the households took a Heimatzeitung and only 11% read a regional newspaper controlled by the NSDAP; almost no one read a supra-regional quality newspaper. People took a daily newspaper, first and foremost, for its local and regional content. Secondly, and pragmatically, they read the advertisements: in particular, they were interested in notices of items wanted and for sale in the district, goods available in the chief town of the Kreis, and advertisements placed by villagers themselves. A third priority, though at some distance behind, was the political section. Fourth in line of interest were miscellaneous entertainment features, such as the novel, though these were read more in winter, when the number of subscriptions rose. (In summer 20% of the families who normally read a newspaper confined themselves to listening to the radio.) In fifth place, and of relevance almost only to younger men, was the sports section, read not so much for its topical reporting as for its background material on results that the readers already knew from the radio or from having attended the event in person. (Young men who read the sports section came under fire from many older people who saw sport as a waste of time.) Only the village intelligentsia—represented by the newspapers’ own correspondents—had any...

68 Ibid., pp. 118–19.
69 A. Schmidt, Publizistik im Dorf, pp. 33–53.
interest in national newspapers, which they bought, not by subscription, but on an occasional basis at kiosks when they were on their travels. Although newspapers and broadcasting were in the process of becoming a combined media system on the production level, in the rural environment the process was far from complete. The difference in the respective communication functions of newspapers and radio comes across very clearly. For most of the people in the village, the Heimat section of the newspaper strengthened their identification with the region (not just the immediate locality). Female readers were especially interested in regional material. As in Sulzthal, the newspaper novel was also popular with women. In other words, a high level of media use did not automatically go hand in hand with a high level of receptivity for explicitly political content. As the ‘Thürungen’ study says, ‘taking a newspaper does not necessarily equate with being influenced by that newspaper’.

The 1920s had already seen the development of ‘agricultural broadcasting’: radio providing information for farmers, which was used by the interest groups involved as a vehicle for promoting their differing goals in agricultural policy. The farming press had campaigned for farmers to buy radio sets and had reported on radio programmes. For the broadcasting industry, the 32.9% of the German population who lived in communities of fewer than 2000 people in 1933 (the figure for 1939 was 30.1%) represented a market that was very far from saturated. In his Franconian village Müller found that only 16.9% of households owned a radio. It was clear that the relative short fall in the number of radio owners in villages, and even more so among farmers, had remained marked. ‘Purely peasant families still own no radio set at all.’ One reason was ‘indifference’ towards the medium. Another was that peasant families regarded radio purely as a medium for entertainment and news; even if they had the time, they did not want to listen to anything improving. At best, ‘educational talks’ were seen as another form of diversion. However, although Müller was quite correct to report this initial reluctance to engage with the new technological media, he overlooked the limiting technical factors that were also involved, such as poor signal quality and people’s financial difficulties. His study, in fact, significantly underestimated the social dynamics that underlay the acquisition of radio sets. In Thürungen, by contrast, with its highly impressive use of topical print media, radio had likewise made further strides than in Sulzthal. Here, 53.8% of all households owned a radio by 1938, a markedly higher proportion than the national average. The remainder...

---

70 Ibid., p. 85.
72 Müller, Ein deutsches Bauerdorf, p. 121; see also F. Cebulla, Rundfunk und ländliche Gesellschaft 1924–1945 (Göttingen, 2004), pp. 43–45.
had refrained from buying one either on grounds of cost or in deference to older members of the household, who were opposed to radio as an innovation or simply had no wish to listen to it. At the time of the survey it was reckoned that the likely saturation point of 80% would soon be reached; radio already had more listeners than newspapers had readers.

What peasants were most interested in was information that was directly relevant to their daily lives, such as weather reports. Next in line came topical information generally (news bulletins, reportage, relays from major events), which gave a sense of simultaneous participation with the rest of the country. As a political medium (broadcasting speeches at party conferences and politically coloured news) radio was associated with the feeling of belonging to a ‘nation’, though the sentiment did not necessarily imply much of a commitment. However, practical constraints, the rhythms of rural life and people’s cultural preferences set limits to radio’s effectiveness as a propaganda medium in the countryside (and there were, admittedly, not enough suitable transmitters available). Although speeches, radio plays on relevant topics and schools broadcasts were all meant to foster an ideology of Bodenständigkeit (nativeness or vernacularity), care had to be taken not to tax listeners’ strictly limited patience: in particular, excess quantities of Blut und Boden might alienate workers and urban members of the Volksgemeinschaft. Special ‘rural programmes’ served, rather, to communicate the régime’s calls for ever-greater effort in agriculture as part of the ‘battle for production’: in this sense, radio was also used as a modern vehicle of vocational education. These programmes were hailed as ‘mediators between town and country’.73

Listeners in the countryside valued radio as an entertainment medium even more highly than urban listeners did. The main demand was for the lighter forms of entertainment—Bavarian folk music, midday concerts, variety shows, military music and dance music—and, as described earlier, the broadcasters readily complied with popular wishes. As an entertainment and music medium, constructing its own space of events and distractions, radio was virtually ubiquitous (at any rate in the evenings), even if rural listeners’ tastes did not fully coincide with those of urban listeners, let alone middle-class listeners. Most village-dwellers had never been to the opera or a symphony concert, and their musical preferences reflected as much.74 Nevertheless, the spread of broadcast entertainment, the new style of presentation of talks in rural programmes, new broadcast genres such as reportage and coverage of traditional ceremonies and the promotion of pseudo-participatory ‘people’s programmes’ (Volkfunk) led to a growing degree of adaptation of the rural population to the general programme standards, although it must be questioned.

74 A. Schmidt, Publizistik im Dorf, pp. 113–50.
whether this means that the differences in ‘tastes and preferences of the city and the country’ were erased.\textsuperscript{75}

We also need to bear in mind the distinctively public character of radio use in the villages, with communal listening sessions in the Gasthaus (comparable to those in factories) — for example, when Hitler’s speeches were broadcast and informal gatherings around the wireless set among neighbours and people from outside the family. That said, as more people acquired their own sets, so radio listening became increasingly private and confined to the immediate family circle.

VII: The Cinema as an Agent of the Media Society in Villages and Small Towns\textsuperscript{76}

Though there were marked variations from region to region, the number of cinemas in small towns in German was already fairly high by the 1930s. However, whereas film-goers in cities — where cinemas had continuous programmes on working days and in the evenings — could decide on the spur of the moment how they would spend their time, film enthusiasts in the countryside had to make a point of attending showings on particular occasions. In villages film shows were often a ‘special attraction’, and many small-town cinemas also showed films in alternation with staging dances and club social events. This indicates, again, that the social rhythms of people’s lives determined the amount of cinema-going, rather than vice versa.

At the end of 1933, after the National Socialists had come to power, the well-made propaganda film \textit{Hitlerjunge Quex} enjoyed great success in the German countryside. It was reported that young people who went to see the film in Birkenfeld, in the Nahe region, ‘were not ashamed to have wept’. That may have been true, but didn’t people go to the cinema to weep anyway? Further propaganda films were heavily promoted during the following years, yet \textit{Triumph des Willen}, for example, ran for only four days at the Schwane Lichtspiele in Idar-Oberstein in the Palatinate Forest, despite the fact that the National Socialist District Director of Film Services hailed it as the ‘most powerful film production of our time’. Audiences in cities, Berlin especially, preferred to see American films, but even in Schwäbisch-Gmünd in Württemberg American films had a 13.9\% share of the market in 1935, and in Idar various American films were successful in the same year. However, as the number of

\textsuperscript{75} Münkel, ‘‘Der Rundfunk geht auf die Dörfer’’, pp. 190–91.

prints in circulation in Germany increased, and with rising consumer expenditure generally, even small towns were able to see a fair cross-section of German-made films by the late 1930s. Perhaps typical of countless examples is the announcement of films that were showing in Idar (a Kreisstadt) on 10 April 1941. The Moderne Lichtspiele were offering Streit um den Knaben Jo, with Willy Fritsch and Lil Dagover, the Post-Lichtspiele Du bist mein Glück and the Schwan-Lichtspiele Frau im Strom; the Saalbau-Lichtspiele in Baumholder were showing the agitprop film Jud Süß, the Lichtspiele Sauer in Fischbach Befreite Hände, starring Brigitte Horney and Olga Tschechowa, and the Lichtspiele Weiss in Niederwörresbach Die Geierwally—the latter, in the words of the announcement, ‘the moving drama of a young girl’s heart’.

As well as using small-town cinemas, the National Socialists strove, through their Regional [Gau] Film Services, to make films available in smaller villages—that is, to the one-third of the total population who lived in places without cinemas of their own. More than any other medium, films held out to people the opportunity of becoming part of the new public that had been created by the media industry: village-dwellers would now be able to claim their own share in the nation’s cultural goods and to participate in the expanding sphere of leisure. This last factor was of special concern to the authorities, who were worried that migration to the cities would otherwise continue to increase. And yet was the converse possibly the case? Did films, by introducing consumerism and urban life-styles into the countryside, actually fan the desire to leave? Even though the régime kept trying to foster a mystique of peasanthood, no films were actually made that enshrined this mystique in a sophisticated and convincing way. Altogether, there were few films that gave an affirmative portrait of rural society such as might have enabled the rural population to identify with the places in which they lived.

By 1935, the Regional Film Services were already organizing 121,345 film showings, which were attended by 21 million people. The standard programme of a National Socialist rural cinema consisted of ‘quality’ new releases, though in practice often only older films were available. There was a besetting problem of ‘delayed’ distribution, given added edge by the fact that programmes at the cinemas in small towns had improved. The purpose of National Socialist rural cinemas was not merely to show films but to provide ‘community experiences’ in order that people’s energies might be released and directed towards specific political ends. In reality, though, the ‘village festival of film’—an attempt to make going to the cinema a special event—was an irregular occurrence.

Nevertheless, in this instance as in others, it is clear that media policy was not merely a question of propaganda but was an attempt to modernize the use of the media generally. And the films that were shown in rural cinemas over the years undeniably went down relatively well—at any rate, when no alternatives were available. The difficulties that the régime encountered in this case show once again, that when studying the media under National Socialism we need...
to pay greater attention than before to the unequal uses that were made of the
media and to the ways in which individual media were received.

Abstract

To date, historians have worked on the assumption that National Socialism used the media to powerful propaganda effect. Yet at an early stage a few voices, especially within Anglo-Saxon scholarship, questioned whether the process was so direct. Increasingly the individual media have been examined, both technically and in terms of their public the reactions they provoked. This essay examines how the media can be said to have modernized under National Socialism, and how newspaper readers, radio listeners and cinema audiences reacted to the development of the media. There were major differences. Radio was conceived as a medium for music and entertainment; new formats were developed in response to listeners turning to programmes from abroad, so that German radio could no longer keep a monopoly on information. The majority of feature films were melodramas and light entertainment, and although many carried a ‘message’, the cinema was fundamentally a commercial, non-political sphere. Newspapers remained relatively conservative in presentation. The press was largely concentrated in the hands of the party, so information was highly controlled, and due to difficulties of production in wartime they became increasingly unattractive, and by 1942 were trusted by few readers. The corpus of the media generally became technically more efficient, and sought to please its growing audience. Total control of the media by the political leaders was not achieved. Particular elements, such as war films, or the ‘Wehrmacht Request Show’, had memorable success. Agenda setting by the media planners put certain key political ideas into the forefront, and they were able to disseminate key symbols and rituals of National Socialism. The media were but one of many agents used, though, to foster political loyalty. The régime also, and more importantly, achieved this by using existing attitudes, and through its permanent threat of violence towards the population, whom they also seduced with material ‘treats’. It emerges that it is both possible and helpful in studying the development of the media to examine it as a process of modernization in the media, in their organizational and technical structures. This process was however undermined wherever in German society anti-modernist ideology and practices persisted or fought back.