

Rüdiger Steinmetz; Judith Kretzschmar

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# THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION IN GERMANY OF 1989/90 FROM THE VIEW OF LOCAL TELEVISION (1990–1995)

Rüdiger Steinmetz  
Leipzig University  
[rstein@uni-leipzig.de](mailto:rstein@uni-leipzig.de)

Judith Kretzschmar  
Leipzig University  
[jkretz@uni-leipzig.de](mailto:jkretz@uni-leipzig.de)

**Abstract:** From 1989/90 to 1995 there was a clash of cultures in Europe and in Germany, West vs. East, in which power was unequally distributed. The approximately 40 Saxon local television programmes from this time represent - with the “view from below,” from East German people in rural and metropolitan areas – unique historical sources for the cultural memory of one of the most important historical cuts in the 20th century. The examination of these nearly never seen programmes and their re-staging today contribute to the revision of established representations, positions and assessments of this period. This contribution deals with the results of our research projects since 2017 (ongoing). We conducted re-runs of local TV programme clips throughout East German federal states (Länder). In the viewers today they did re-actualise life experiences as well as buried, repressed or (only) learned, acquired contexts and feelings of the saddle period of 1990 to 1995. This way, explanations can be given for the roots of current social problems and political discourses. For the first time in history, this singular pool of local television programmes contains the records of an important German and European transformation process through moving images, in a bottom-up production process of self-professionalized citizens, and not in a state TV top-down process of power elites. To date, these historical television sources have not been given any major attention, neither by researchers nor by politicians, nor by archives (apart from us).

**Keywords:** Local TV, Saxony, Transformation period, great transformation Germany, audio-visual sources

## 1 Introduction

“Politics - most people don't give a damn...,” says 14-year-old Liane from Görlitz<sup>1</sup> in a 1995 programme made by the student editorial team of *Euro-RegionalTV Görlitz* (eRTV) on young people's disenchantment with politics.



Video 1. Youth and politics.

The process of unifying Germany and Europe began with the fall of the Berlin Wall and of the 1000-kilometer-long German-German border, five years before. And Görlitz is directly situated at the border to Poland, separated only by River Neisse and connected by a bridge.

25 years later, in 2020, we, the researchers, are touring the state of Saxony with this and other re-discovered local TV programmes from the early transformation period. We are recording the feedback, the feelings, the memories that these archive sources trigger in viewers of three generations. In Görlitz, a young viewer from the post-reunification generation, around the same age as Liane in the TV clip, finds that not much has changed, and the East-West clichés still exist:

“I found the clip with the young people exciting because these are actually the same topics that you come across when you talk today to pupils, students and all kinds of younger people in the city (scil.: Görlitz). (...) We have only had the experiences mainly through our parents. But many attitudes, including this East-West thing, haven't changed that much yet. Some of them have stagnated somehow (...), such clichés that have not really changed over 30, 40, 50 years. In society and we ourselves in our generation (have) taken over parts of these clichés (...) and (have) also learned certain opinions (...) that still come from that time and don't change.”<sup>2</sup>

This young woman can easily bridge the time and transfer the topics of the 1995 TV programme into her own presence.

## 2 Project Background

From 1989/90 to 1995 there was a clash of cultures in Europe and in Germany, West vs. East, in which power was distributed unequally. The approximately 40 Saxon local television programmes from this time represent - with the



Video 2. Video statement of the researchers.

“view from below,” from East German people in rural as well as metropolitan areas - unique historical sources for the cultural memory of one of the most important historical cuts in the 20th century.

The examination and analysis of these nearly never seen programmes and their re-staging today contribute to the revision of established representations, positions and assessments of this period, of the “Great Transformation” (for the term: see below). These unique sources are as close as possible to the people and events in this transformation era between 1990 and 1995, as they were made *from* neighbours *for* neighbours. Today, they should be made available in the classroom as well as online education. And, foremost, they must be saved digitally, their contents be indexed archivally and be made available for research and re-use in new programmes.

In our research projects since 2017 (ongoing), we conducted re-runs of local TV programme clips throughout East German federal states (Länder). The viewers today did re-actualise life experiences as well as buried, repressed or (only) learned, acquired contexts and feelings of the early transformation period. This way, explanations can be given for the roots of current social problems and political discourses.

For the first time in history, this singular, but dispersed pool of local television programmes contains the records of an important German and European transformation process by moving images, focussing on the hot spots. Moving images, which have been produced in a bottom-up process of self-professionalized citizens, and not in a state-run TV top-down process of media and power elites; not in - partly propaganda driven and stately run newsreels like in WWI and WWII, nor in state-run, public nor commercial TV (For this background, see video 3).

To date, these historical television sources have not been given any major attention, neither by researchers nor by politicians, nor by archives (you may get an impression of the programmes in Video 4).

R. Steinmetz and J. Kretschmar, The Great Transformation in Germany of 1989/90 from the View of Local Television (1990–1995)



Video 3. Mission statement of local TV maker Pastor Gerd Simmank, *Laubuscher Heimatkanal*.



Video 4. Project trailer - Next door television. Saxon local television 1990 to 1995.

### 3 Theoretical Background

#### 3.1 The “New Great Transformation”

The years 1989/1990 represent the third major caesura in the 20th century, after 1918 and 1945. In time-lapse-speed, they mark the beginning of a profound process of throwing over nearly all the political, economic, cultural, media and social standards of the old system and forcing the nearly 16 million people in GDR to acquire and adopt to a new system and consequently change their everyday lives. This has been called the “New Great Transformation,” and we define it in the project as a profound overthrow by peaceful revolutionary processes, resulting in fundamental structural breaks or transformations.

#### 3.2 Media and the Cultural Memory

Through their audio-visual representation and distribution, media transmit and translate between the individual and the socio-cultural dimension of collective memory. The cultural anthropologist Aleida Assmann examined Memory Culture.<sup>3</sup> Media such as fictional, documentary film and, as here, in our project, local television programmes, form a living memory that transforms personally experienced memories into a cultural memory. More than ever before in history, the very specific mediatisation of the processes and outcomes of a key historical event has the potential to provide “impulses and trigger stimuli”<sup>4</sup> for the cultural memory of the future. Over time, this appropriated media memory enters the experiential memories of present and future individuals, groups and generations and is “re-incarnated.”<sup>5</sup> This takes place both among contemporary witnesses (pre-transformation generation) and among those, who were just born during the time of the mediated events (transformation generation) or not yet born at all (post-transformation generation). Thus, memories of the 1990s are omnipresent as part of a memory of an experiential memory. Assmann defines this omnipresence as the “still-present of the past.”<sup>6</sup>

Local television of the Transformation era re-vitalizes resp. coins the cultural memory of these three different generations (Figure 1).

#### 3.3 The Understanding of “Heimat”

“Heimat” had certainly been a topic in the GDR – as “Socialist Heimat” –, but it was used by the SED and the state leadership to develop and intensify a sense of national identity among the citizens. The emotional attachment to the close homeland/Heimat was to be extended to the state entity and the social order. The individual understanding of “Heimat”, however, was different. Increasing political paternalism encouraged a retreat into the private sphere. Away from everyday political life, people did not live in a socialist way, but rather in a petty-bourgeois world, and regardless of the national consciousness desired by the state, there was a longing among the population for regionality, the formation of local traditions, customs and culture, that had for long grown historically. Long-lost Heimat traditions re-emerged after 1989. At the same time, from the early 1990s onward, parallel to or as part of “Heimat,” a “GDR identity” emerged, because it was mainly in retrospect that the country was perceived as a Heimat, a feeling that SED propaganda was never really able to evoke. The reason for this lies in the original nature of Heimat: It is only addressed when it is in danger.

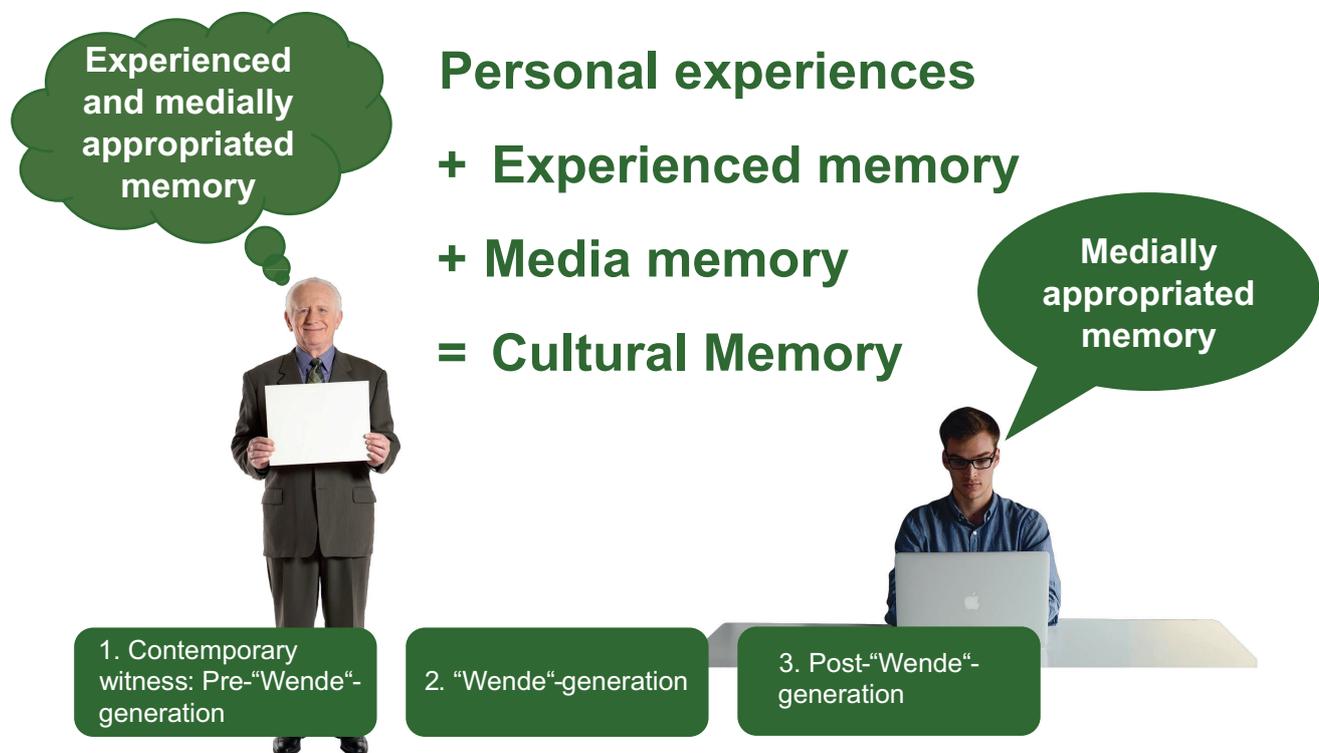


Figure 1. Own illustration based on Aleida Assmann's *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit* (2018).

These developments are also reflected in the local television programmes which we analysed; reports on local traditions and customs, the use of dialects, the beauties of the landscapes are juxtaposed with the acute threats, losses and profound changes in the closer Heimat in the Transformation in the first half of the 1990s. In addition, idealizations of the GDR and a nostalgic longing for socialist times can be found in the programs.

### 3.4 Television Programmes as Archival Sources

Written (archival) sources are part of the standard repertoire of historians; in memory research today, (audio-)visual sources are considered to be already fully integrated: “In fact, the importance of visual culture for remembering can hardly be overestimated.”<sup>7</sup> At the same time, in the age of media and internet publics, and of the non-written fixed interpersonal as well as dispersed mass communication, the importance of written records as sources has already diminished.<sup>8</sup> Television is a “memory machine.”<sup>9</sup> It is not only a *medium*, not only an uninvolved (*super-*)mediator, but it also contributes significantly to the “instrumentalisation of ‘memory.’”

In media and communication sciences, the ingredients of the instrumentalisation by media must always be analysed, including the socio-cultural context conditions of their emergence in the process of memory formation. In our “Heimat” project, the (re)construction of this media *dispositif*<sup>10</sup> was based on these elements and corresponding research methods. Furthermore, the structures of the respective media systems as centralised vs. federal, as state/party vs. public (or commercial or citizens’) media must always be critically evaluated.

The local television programmes of the early transformation period (1990-1995), which were the subject of our “Heimat” project, preserved the experiences and feelings of the people in this period very authentically and far beyond

written, photographic, auditory and oral history sources – and this for three reasons: 1. They were created at the local human base of the experienced transformations of everyday life, in small and medium-sized and a few conurbation communities; 2. in a bottom-up process by citizens and neighbours who were professionalising themselves by and in the media; 3. in programmes that were (still) largely unadulterated and unabridged by television formatting, characterised by unbiased media interaction (of makers and of the presented people), and still little commercialised.

The local television programmes of the transformation period 1990 to 1995 enjoyed a high degree of credibility: they were produced *by neighbours for neighbours*, who were connected by proximity in a common everyday life, characterised by trust between communicators and recipients. The programmes were also credible because of the proximity of the viewers to the spaces and events. And finally and generally, the interweaving of moving image and sound has a high presumption of authenticity. “Credibility is at the beginning of all remembering.”<sup>11</sup>

The local television programmes have a special model character. They are characterised by an extreme contrast to the period until 1989: While GDR television served as a state instrument of political information, orientation, education and entertainment for the working class and as a weapon in the Cold War<sup>12</sup>, the local television programmes were established independently of each other, as well as of the state or external investors. They were initiatives of the citizens (in part even of so-called *antenna communities* already in GDR times), for quite different motives.

## 4 Methods

### 4.1 Research Questions & Thematic Categories

General Research question: What do the many Saxon private local television programmes of the early years after the Peaceful Revolution (1990-1995) contribute to the understanding of the transition to a unified Germany and today's explosive topics of European integration?

*RQ 1: To what extent can life experiences as well as buried or suppressed contexts and feelings of this transformation period be re-actualised in today's viewers by the encounter with these historical programmes?*

*RQ 2: To what extent can current social and political discourses in united Germany be traced back to their origins and be explained?*

Thematic categories: In the “Heimat” project, we developed thematic categories from historical, political, sociological, media studies and oral history literature: 1. system transformation, understood in an overarching way, 2. political transformation: building new political, democratic and constitutional structures, 3. economic transformation, 4. cultural life, 5. working life, 6. social and general human situation, 7. dealing with the past, 8. Heimat, 9. (transport) infrastructure, (landscape and city) architecture, ecology, 10. one's own and the foreign (East-West as well as foreigners), 11. phases of experience with unification, 12. new media structures and experiences.

### 4.2 Research Modules

We developed a special mix of methods, in order to meet best the values and importance of the sources, not to only analyse them as relicts of the past and in their historical context, but also to re-feed them into the presence by confronting present viewers, their experiences and memories, with the historical media sources.

Our mix of steps and research modules: 1. Preserving, i.e. finding, digitizing, indexing of programmes. 2. Analysis of programme contents, formats, topics. 3. Presenting to and discussing with people throughout the country; analysing these feedbacks. 4. Interviews with contemporary witnesses as well as with the pioneers of local TV. 5. Public touring exposition with TV clips, photos, posters and other exhibits of the historical, analogue TV production at the city of Torgau by river Elbe, Marienberg in the Ore Mountains (and other places): *A Country in a radical Change (Land im Umbruch)*. 6. Producing educational material for school and adult further education: text, sound and TV clip compilations.

Here you will find a photo gallery of some our presentations.

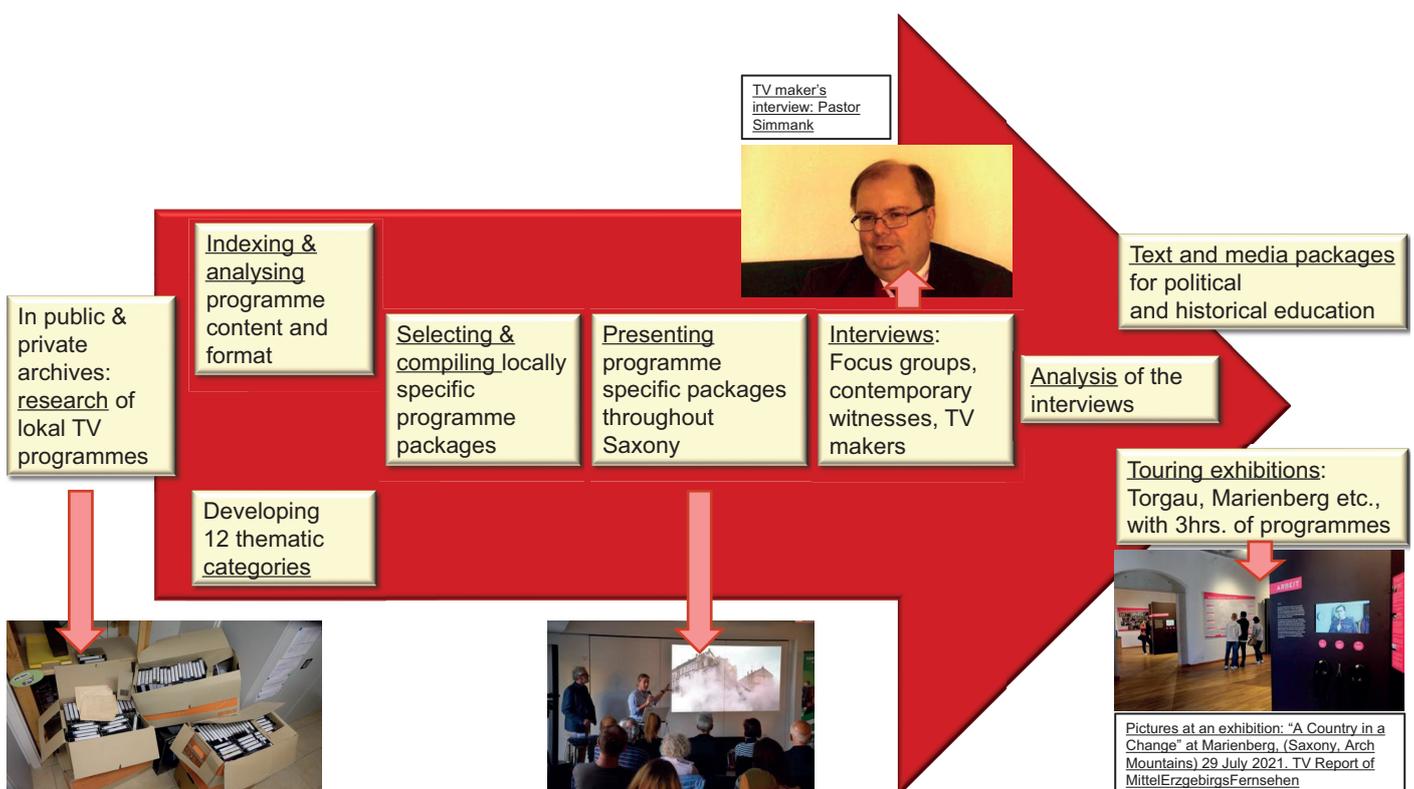


Figure 2. Research modules.

## 5 How Can the Programmes be Preserved, Indexed, Catalogued and Accessed?

Saxony hosted the most ample landscape of local TV stations in the whole of Germany:<sup>13</sup> 40 until 1995 and around 80 until the end of the decade. The first - and for the early transformation most interesting - programmes started in March 1990, most of them in late 1994 and early 1995. This “golden time” of local TV was due to the Great Transformation and partly to an “open sky” perspective, media wise.

The programmes consisted of three elements: local information programmes with news and reports, local teletext with information, service and advertising, and local advertising spots; in the beginning also music clips, international advertising and TV serials from West German TV stations. Our present cautious calculation sums up to around 1000 local news-and-report-TV programme hours from 1990 to 1995. We have viewed a big part of them but cannot be sure not to find new cassettes somewhere in some moving boxes. Especially in the early phase of the New Great

Transformation, most of the programmes have been recorded on VHS, only a few on Betacam SP. All these analogue tapes have by far reached and surpassed their technical durability.

To be very clear: Up to now, most of the programmes are still in the hands of the former producers and programme makers resp. their successors, often family. It is a very diverse landscape, also due to the fact that local TV production never lead to commercial wealth. There is no central archive and no digital platform to make this media heritage accessible for research and re-use. Moreover, most of the programmes are not yet digitized, and nearly all of them have not even been indexed, at least not on a professional archival level.

This analogue heritage is endangered in its technical as well as cultural existence. With our work we hope to find national as well as international cooperation and research support programmes (See [here](#) for background, with text in English).

## **6 Example: “The West as a Test”: Irony, Self-Irony and Self-Shame in Local TV and in Focus Group Feedback**

### **6.1 Context of video clip (Mid March, 1990 of Studio Leipzig / Stadtfernsehen Leipzig)**

From the sources, it is not exactly dateable, probably on 13<sup>th</sup> March 1990. It is one of the first programmes of this newly established local TV programme; it is four months after the opening of the Berlin Wall and the whole frontier between West and East Germany, and it is at the beginning of the Leipzig Trade Fair (13<sup>th</sup> March) and only a few days before the first - and last - free elections of the GDR Parliament, the Volkskammer (18<sup>th</sup> March). The state of GDR is still existing and functioning to a certain extent; it is three months before the currency union of both German states (1<sup>st</sup> July), and it is not quite seven months before the unification of Germany (3<sup>rd</sup> October 1990).

All this takes place on Leipzig’s historical market square and in front of the historical townhall. Merchants from West Germany are selling fruit, vegetables and other goods. Western brands invade the market, in the beginning as free gifts. Newspapers from West Germany have flooded the market since early March 1990, even if – formally – this is still illegal. Their free copies are meant to introduce brands and feed the demand for information.

The reporter is a political cabaret artist of the well-known cabaret of former University of Leipzig students, “academixer”, the history of which dates back to 1966. Critically as they acted against GDR authorities and looked at manifestations of socialism, he picks up the presence of the very fresh and seemingly very open unification process. From the beginning, Christian Becher (1943-2013) worked for *Studio Leipzig* as a reporter as well as a live anchor in the studio.

The format of this clip (which was shortened by us) is far away from a classical journalist TV report. It contains a combination of critical, highly sophisticated interview questioning, bordering to displaying satirical reality and ironic commentary; and on the audio-visual level an observing as well as a commenting camera, and the use of original, atmospheric sound, which contributes to authenticity on the one hand and to sophisticated commentary on the other. All this forms the synaesthesia of a TV piece for which the test slogan of the western cigarette brand “West” (est. 1981) provides the critical motto: The West as a Test.”

Why “Test”? As at this early time in March 1990, it was not yet clear, whether the GDR would stay a separate, no longer socialist, but reformed state, or whether it would be integrated into resp. united with the Federal Republic – as it came true within the next few months.

## 6.2 Contextualization

This local TV **piece** is in its depth not easy to understand for younger generations than the contemporary witnesses, and neither for non-Leipzig and non-GDR citizens. For these reasons, we provide some explanations: During our focus group discussions, some contemporary witnesses were thrilled by the synaesthesia of visual and audio commentary, when in a close-up hands of adult citizens are grasping for the free “Milka” chocolate gifts (TC 00:55-01:07). And by the text: “It looks as if we have only our hands. The hands, which a GDR citizen keeps always open.”

Seeing this in one of our focus group meetings, a contemporary witness started sobbing, mirroring this scene in her own experience, and transferring it to Görlitz, where she lived:

“I experienced it myself on Marienplatz with this huge truck of “Milka” distributing the chocolate bars for free. And as soon as one bar fell down, people were crawling on all fours and picked them up. I thought: What happened to people? Why are we demeaning ourselves like this? And collect ourselves (scil.: by western brands)?” (TC 0:14-0:35).

This contemporary witness felt a deep self-shame by the trigger of this TV clip - seeing it nearly 30 years later, and transferring it from Leipzig to Görlitz, and feeling emotions of self-shame for this general phenomenon of these experiences in the early transformation time.

Some more contexts: “Tutti Frutti”, Italian for “all/mixed fruits,” was a soft-porn show in the (West German) commercial TV programme of RTL, which had just started in January 1990 (150 shows 1990-93) and was also known and seen in GDR. In his off-text, reporter Becher uses the original sound of the fruit dealer (TC 01:19) for a wordplay (TC 01:23-01:27).

The chorus (TC 01:37-01:52): “An der Himmelstür, an der Himmelstür, da gelten ganz andere Regeln als hier (...) da sind die Menschen allemal gleich.” In the atmospheric sound we hear the song of West German pop singer Peter Alexander of 1977, which was well-known to East Germans, too.

Reporter Becher’s commentary: “Alles läuft wie am Schnürchen”: The party “Demokratischer Aufbruch” („DA“, „Democratic Breakup“), was established in the fall of 1989, and the lawyer Wolfgang Schnur became its best known member. For the Volkskammer elections he was the top candidate, and he had some chances of being elected the new Prime Minister of GDR. Only a few days before the elections, his work for Stasi from 1965 until March 1990 was made public by media, and he had to step back from all ambitions. In these months, this was only one of a lot of disclosures of that kind. In German, “Schnürchen” = “String” is a diminutive form of the word “cord.” And cord is the literal translation of “Schnur.” “Alles läuft wie am Schnürchen” – this pun on the name “string” = “Schnur” translates into “it goes like clockwork.” These are only some of the many wordplays, innuendos and comments in this clip.

## 6.3 To sum up

The “Test” motto fitted these – for all East Germans – uncertain times perfectly. With irony versus the West, the self-irony versus the East, with the long-term effect of humiliating and traumatizing experiences, as self-shame existing until today this was brought into an audio-visual, syn-aesthetical narration.

R. Steinmetz and J. Kretschmar, The Great Transformation in Germany of 1989/90 from the View of Local Television (1990–1995)



Video 5. “The West as a Test.”



Video 6. Statements in focus group discussions.

## 7 Some Preliminary Results

Coming back to our research questions:

*RQ 1: To what extent can life experiences as well as buried or suppressed contexts and feelings of this transformation period be re-actualised in today's viewers by the encounter with these historical programmes?*

Here we have to differentiate between the three generation groups. Among the contemporary witnesses, fears about the future and existence, traumatisation and feelings of self-shame and shame were re-actualised (both then and now). East-West prejudices are remembered, but evaluated differently. A considerable part of these feelings is still virulent today, regardless of whether the contemporary witnesses tend to take a positive or a negative view of unification. For the two younger generations, the authors can only make a preliminary statement because of their relatively small share in the focus groups: Fears and traumatisation are not to be found here; instead, an eager, grateful inhaling of audio-visually induced views of everyday life at the time. Without the local television reports these impressions would have consisted at best of childhood memories, stories or educational texts and photo stills, acquired by parents or from school and university.

*RQ 2: To what extent can current social and political discourses in united Germany be traced back to their origins and be explained?*

To this day, East and West Germans are confronted with two different cultural, social worlds of work and experience. Due to the common time period of three decades (1990-2021), this polarisation “East” vs. “West” no longer exists in its pure form as it did in the early transformation era. Many differentiations, mixtures and common experiences have occurred. But hoped-for and experienced changes have not always been congruent, and despite mutual efforts: the “Great Mental Transformation” – and thus the completion of the German-German and European unification – is an unfinished process that continues to this day and beyond.

## Notes

1. Liane (student) in: On young people’s disenchantment with politics, *eRTV Görlitz*, 1995.
2. Speaker at the City Library of Görlitz on 10 October 2019, Post-Transformation-Generation, East Germany. #01:59:27–7# Focus group discussion in the context of research project of Judith Kretschmar and Rüdiger Steinmetz: “Heimat heute - oder: Jeder hat sein Nest im Kopf” (2019-2021), funded by the Free State of Saxony as part of the funding line “Revolution und Democracy.”
3. Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit* [The long shadow of the past] (München: C.H. Beck, 2018).
4. *Ibid*, 242.
5. *Ibid*, 215.
6. Aleida Assmann, *Geschichte im Gedächtnis* [History in the memory] (München: C.H.Beck, 2014), 14.
7. Astrid Erll, *Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen* [Collective memory and cultures of remembrance] (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2017), 154.
8. cf. inter alia Edgar Wolfrum, *Rot-Grün an der Macht: Deutschland 1998 – 2005* [Red-Green at the power: Germany 1998–2005] (München: C.H. Beck, 2013), 715.
9. Leif Kramp, *Gedächtnismaschine Fernsehen* [Memory Machine Television] (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011).
10. cf. Knut Hickethier, *Dispositiv Fernsehen* [Dispositive Television], *montage/av* 4, no. 1 (1995): 63–83.
11. Kramp, *Gedächtnismaschine Fernsehen*, vol 1., 360.
12. cf. Edeltraut Peschel, *Journalismus in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik in der entwickelten sozialistischen Gesellschaft von 1971 bis 1986 (Abriss)* [Journalism in the GDR in the developed socialist society], in *Lehrheft 4 zur Geschichte des DDR-Journalismus*, ed. (Leipzig: Karl-Marx-Universität Leipzig, 1987), 101.
13. And it does until today.

## Biographies

Prof. Dr. Rüdiger Steinmetz has been teaching and researching Media Studies and Media History (film, television) since 1979. He was a founding member of IAMHIST (Int. Ass. for Media & History) and a member of Studienkreis Rundfunk und Geschichte (at times its president). CV, publications: <https://www.uni-leipzig.de/personenprofil/mitarbeiter/prof-dr-ruediger-steinmetz/>

Dr. Judith Kretzschmar is Ass. Prof. at Centre for Journalism and Democracy at Leipzig University. Has been teaching and researching Media Studies and Media History (film, television) since 2002. Project leader of oral history project “Contemporary Witnesses of Broadcasting” as well as vice-chair of Studienkreis Rundfunk und Geschichte. Board member of Zentrum für Wissenschaft und Forschung | Medien; co-editor of “neoscript.” CV, publications: <https://www.sozphil.uni-leipzig.de/institut-fuer-kommunikations-und-medienwissenschaft/personenprofil/mitarbeiter/dr-judith-kretzschmar/>