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An Icon of Turning Tides in the Relationship Between the State, the Economy and Society in 1980s Germany

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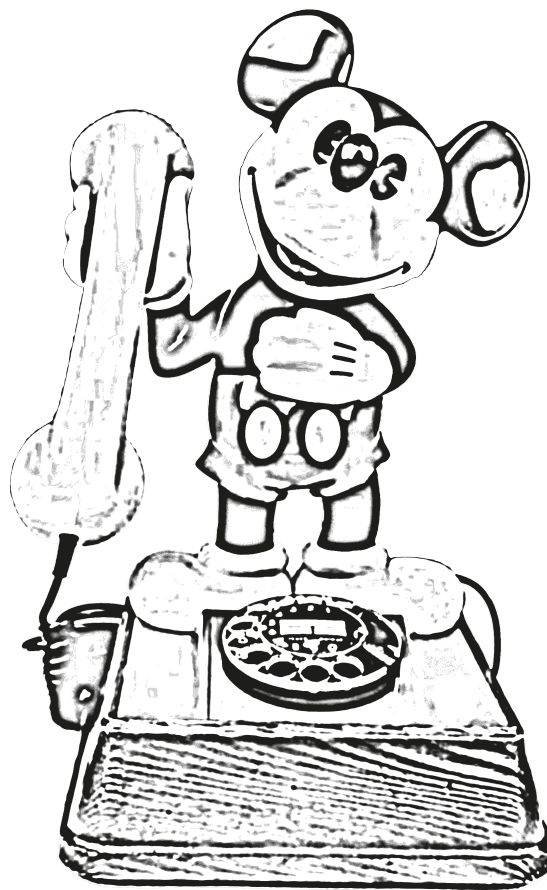
The Mickey Mouse Telephone
An Icon of Turning Tides in the Relationship Between the State, the Economy and Society in 1980s Germany

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Abstract The 1980s saw the triumph of neoliberal thinking in Western European societies and economies. Referring to neoliberal economists, governments across Europe implemented policies to deregulate (inter)national markets and to privatise national monopolies. One priority were the large postal and telecommunication services monopolies. In terms of media iconography, one icon of this 'turn of the tides' in the regulation of German telephone markets was the 'Mickey Mouse Telephone'. It was a symbol of the American way of life and the freedom of choice, of the firm belief in the power of markets and the deregulation of monopolies. Nevertheless, the Mickey Mouse Telephone was an antagonism in itself. It was a symbol of American (technological) superiority, and yet, when it was introduced in the German market, it was overpriced and featured an outdated technology. Provided by the 'Deutsche Bundespost' – the German state-owned postal and telecommunications monopoly business – the Mickey Mouse Telephone was an analogue model equipped with a dial. The price was several times higher than for a standard phone model. This paper places the Mickey Mouse Telephone in the broader historical context of the relationship between the state, the economy and society in 1980s Germany.

Keywords media history, neoliberalism, telecommunication, regulatory policy, media iconography.

I. Introduction

The 1980s could be seen as the peak of neoliberal thinking in the societies and economies of Europe. Referring to the writings of Milton Friedman[1] and the Chicago School, who believed in the power of markets and the individual's freedom of choice, politicians across Western Europe implemented policies to deregulate (inter)national markets. One of their priorities were the large monopolies in telecommunication services. Established in the 19th century, these monopolies were now blamed for technological backwardness and opened up to competition in a controversial process during the 1980s and 1990s.[2]

In terms of media iconography, one icon of the turning tides in the regulation of German telecommunication markets was the Mickey Mouse Telephone. The model was an antagonism in itself. On the one hand it was a (neoliberal) symbol for freedom of choice, for the firm belief in the power of markets and for individualism. On the other hand, when it was introduced in the German market, it was overpriced and featured an outdated analogue technology, equipped with a dial at a time when digitization began to promise a new era of telecommunica-

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[1] Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*; Werding, *Gab es.*

[2] Haucap and Kühling, *Europäische Regulierung.*

Fig. 1: Mickey Mouse Telephone.

tions. The price was several times higher than for a standard phone offered by the Bundespost.

In this paper, I will discuss the Mickey Mouse Telephone as a media icon that reflects the 'turn of the tides' in the relationship between the German state, the economy and society. I will explore the Mickey Mouse Telephone and the deregulation of the telecommunication markets within the broader historical context of the organisation of German society and economy, arguing that the design, technology and availability of technical artefacts such as phones mirror the relationship between the state, the economy and society.[3] It is not possible to discuss the concept of neoliberalism or the deregulation of the German telecommunication market and the privatisation of the Deutsche Bundespost in detail in this paper.

I will use the Mickey Mouse Telephone as an entry point to instigate a dialogue between media history, economic history and the history of technology. This dialogue seems long overdue, as both the history of technology and media history have paid little attention to the role of regulatory policy so far.[4] Instead, they have focused on the emergence of networks,

different technologies or individual aspects of digitization.[5] Some studies have explored interdependencies between technical and regulatory change,[6] but the broader context has usually been neglected.[7] The majority of studies has focused on the 1980s and investigated the consequences of deregulation and privatisation.[8] Telecommunication equipment such as the Mickey Mouse Telephone—and in particular its design and technology—has never been analysed as an icon of the changing relationship between the state, the economy and society in the 1980s.

For the purposes of this paper, I will define neoliberalism, which was the ideological basis of deregulation in the 1980s, as a particular approach to the relationship between the state, the economy and society that puts the individual—and their freedom of decision and expression—at the centre of policy-making and regulation. This approach is in sharp contrast to an interpretation of statehood that allows the state to intervene in both the individual life of its citizens and the economy.[9] Finding the most suitable way of regulating telecommunication markets therefore also raised the question of how to regulate societies and individuals' lives. As the most common end device for telecommunication services at the time, the phone was one of the most obvious connections between the individual citizen and the state's regulatory policy. The standardised phone model used in every household, in most cases only rented from the Deutsche Bundespost, symbolised a state that limited the individual freedom of choice. Phones were the most visible part of the monopoly and the users' restricted options. As such, they embodied the contrast between the changing norms and values of an individualistic society and the restrictions imposed by the monopoly. End devices such as phones were the most obvious item for public discourse. Not only were they very visible, but also an easy topic to discuss for a general public with hardly any knowledge about other technological features of telecommunication networks, like cables, amplifiers or switches. The design, technology and availability of phones

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3 See for a similar approach: Bijsterveld and van Dijk, *Sound Souvenirs*; Vermaas, *A Philosophy of Technology*.

4 Castells, *The Rise*; Noam, *Telecommunications in Europe*.

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5 McLelland, *The Routledge Companion*; Kaiser and Schot, *Writing the Rules*; Badenoch and Fickers, *Europe Materializing*.

6 See for example: Thematic Focus: Fundaments of Digitization, in: Media in Action, Issue 01/2017 (https://www001.zimt.uni-siegen.de/ojs/index.php/mia/issue/view/1); Ambrosius and Henrich-Franke, *Integration of Infrastructures,* Schneider, *Die Transformation der Telekommunikation;* Hüttig, *Die Deregulierung;* Van Laak, *Alles im Fluss.*

7 Metzler, *Ein deutscher Weg*.

8 Cowhey, *The international telecommunications regime*, 169–199; Savage, *The Politics*.

9 Bösch, Hertfelder and Metzler, *Grenzen des Neoliberalismus*; Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*

became an important aspect in the debate about the deregulation of telecommunication markets. The Mickey Mouse Telephone is therefore an excellent example to analyse the tensions between regulatory policies, technologies and societal change.

II. Historical roots of the German monopoly market for (tele)communication

Since early modern times,[10] European nation-states attempted to increase their income in order to build nationwide infrastructures in accordance with the economic policy of mercantilism.[11] State-owned enterprises offering telecommunication services were part of these concepts. Their importance steadily grew in the 19th and 20th centuries, when the complexity of the state and the division of labour within national economies increased. The rise of the modern nation-state is mirrored in the monopoly for postal and telecommunication services in Germany.[12]

Classical economics saw telecommunication services as an elementary component of the modern economy and emphasised their importance for economic progress. The German telecommunication monopoly was part of this thinking, and the government (or the individual states' governments before the creation of the German *Reich* in 1871) assigned the national monopoly to a state-owned or strictly controlled service provider. Usually, this provider had the monopoly on all equipment, invoking common welfare and social justice as guiding principles. The emphasis on the link between state monopoly and economic theory reached its peak in the theoretical works of John Maynard Keynes in the mid-20th century.[13] The German minister for economic affairs, Karl Schiller, a member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), even incorporated Keynesian thinking and elements such as the 'Globalsteuerung' (macroeconomic regulation and control) into the concept of 'Soziale Marktwirtschaft' (social market economy), which had its roots in ordoliberal thinking.[14] According to this view, all users should be able to enjoy the same service conditions regarding the access to and the quality of telecommunication services. Consequently, the monopoly provider was neither allowed to apply price reductions for major customers nor to charge higher prices for difficult service conditions. The Deutsche Bundespost was committed to

offer the same services nationwide, regardless of a region's geography or population density.[15]

The Bundespost organised the services and the production of all necessary equipment. Phones, cables, amplifiers etc. were produced or supplied by a strictly limited number of companies such as Siemens or Telefunken. In most cases, customers could only buy or hire their equipment from the Bundespost which at the same time formed cartels with national equipment producers. In the 1960s and 1970s, these cartels gained in strength due to an enormous increase in the number of private phone connections and a growing range of equipment. The 'Fernsprechtischapparat 75'—a standard model offered by the Deutsche Bundespost—was adopted by millions of private households nationwide. It was a symbol of uniformity and limited choice at a time when individual expression, individual lifestyles and the freedom of choice increased in importance in German society. The Keynesian understanding of the relationship between the state, the economy and society is reflected in the design of phone models in the 1970s.

Fig. 2: Fernsprechtischapparat 75.

III. Turning tides during the 1970s

Historical research portrays the 1970s as an important turning point in the development of German society. Cracks started to appear in the established relationship between the state, the economy and society.[16] Some of them triggered a debate about the most suitable regulatory policy for the telecommunication market from the late 1970s. The three most

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10 Dahlmeier, *Poststreit im Alten Reich*, 80–86.
11 Magnusson, *Mercantilism*.
12 Bösch, *Mediengeschichte*; Ambrosius, *Der Staat als Unternehmer*.
13 Kahn, *The Making of Keynes*.
14 Ptak, *Vom Ordoliberalismus zur Sozialen Marktwirtschaft*.

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15 Tenzer, *Aspekte der Endgerätepolitik*.
16 Bösch, *Zeitenwende 1979*, Raphael and Doering-Manteuffel, *Nach dem Boom*; Raphael and Doering-Manteuffel, *Vorgeschichte der Gegenwart*.

important tide changes arose from economic theory, sociocultural norms and changing technology.

a) Economic theory: neoliberalism

The 1970s were a decade marked by a deep structural economic crisis in the liberal democracies of the Western hemisphere. Key developments were the oil crises in 1973 and 1979,[17] the structural change in the European industries, decreasing economic growth, high unemployment rates and a rapidly growing public debt.[18] As a consequence, theorists of the free market economy began to raise their voices again. Neoliberal scholars like Milton Friedman and members of the Chicago School blamed the proliferating Keynesian-style interventionist state for the economic crisis.[19] They argued that the state was incapable of collecting all relevant data required for drafting good policies and that the high level of social spending was no longer affordable. Instead, they considered individual decisions made by entrepreneurs and customers as economically more efficient than government planning. The neoliberal thinkers therefore advocated a radical rearrangement of the market's regulatory order. Governments were asked to withdraw from markets for goods and services, to liberalise market regulations and to privatise state monopolies. It was argued that the state's role should be limited to supervising the basic parameters of competition and preventing the formation of monopolies and cartels. The public expenditure quota and enterprises such as state-owned companies, state monopolies or activities like fixing prices should be reduced. From the late 1970s, and to a varying degree, neoliberal ideas based on the superiority of the individual freedom of choice were implemented in economic policies first in the United Kingdom and then across Western Europe.[20] Remarkably, telecommunication was the priority sector for neoliberal endeavours to deregulate telecommunication markets and privatise the state monopoly.[21]

b) Sociocultural norms: individualism

Liberal thinking and a greater trust in individual decisions, expressions of lifestyles and demands were more than just elements of economic theory. Particularly in former totalitarian countries such as Germany, individualism grew in importance as a sociocultural norm and value, impacting all facets of human life. With economic growth and a higher level of income, people demanded products that helped them express their individual lifestyles. Consumer goods such as the Volkswagen Beetle and others produced in the 1950s and 1960s as cheap mass products now vanished from the markets, replaced by a wide range of models that offered a variety of individual features.[22] US products and movies in particular had a huge impact on German culture. US series such as Dallas or Denver Clan were broadcast on German channels and introduced US values to Germany. Among the most important cultural imports were Disney products, and Mickey Mouse was an important icon for the American dream.[23] In addition, 'new social movements' like the peace movement or the women's movement transformed the relationship between the state and its citizens in the 1970s. Conformity and acceptance were replaced by individualism, participation and criticism. These movements demanded direct participation in political decisions beyond the usual parliamentary procedure.[24]

The change in the underlying sociocultural norms impacted communication habits and media consumption. Data communication, early computer or mobile devices (for broadcasting and telecommunication) also contributed to an increased demand for more individual communication with more customised technologies.[25] At a time when individualistic culture and concepts like neoliberalism shifted towards the individual citizen, the focus of regulatory policies also shifted towards the supply-side and the publics' access to equipment and the industry monopoly.

c) Technology: digitization of telecommunication

The merger of telecommunication and data processing was another important issue. A number of substantial innovations for phone and data networks took shape outside the monopoly structure of the telecommunication sector. Computer manufacturers such as IBM or Nixdorf and individual engineers experimented with packet switching networks for data communication between computers. Electronic data processing and switching were not completely new, but the number and complexity of networks grew enormously in the late 1970s.[26] The risk of a pluralisation of networks arose as there was a potential

17 Painter, *Oil and Geopolitics*.
18 Judt, *Postwar*.
19 Lange, *Die Bedeutung der Neuen Vertragstheorie*.
20 Bösch, Hertfelder and Metzler, *Grenzen des Neoliberalismus*.
21 Eagleton-Pierce, *Neoliberalism: The Key Concepts*.

22 Kaelble, *Sozialgeschichte Europas*, 87–116.
23 Forbes, *Mickey Mouse as Icon*, 242–252.
24 Scott, *Ideology*; Henrich-Franke, *Globale Welt*.
25 Fickers and Griset, *Communicating Europe*.
26 Henrich-Franke, *Alter Draht*, 97–112.

of packet switching and other data communication networks developing outside the public telephone network. From a technological point of view, there was no need for these networks to be subordinated to the state monopoly.

In Germany, an action brought before the Federal Court of Justice by Nixdorf and others to enforce the permission to develop data communication networks outside of the Deutsche Bundespost's monopoly was dismissed in 1978.[27] After the court's decision, some computer technology and software developers deliberately violated the equipment monopoly to put the debate about future regulation on data networks on the political and public agenda. They illegally connected their acoustic coupler (an early form of the modem) to the telephone network and were subsequently taken to court by the monopoly.[28]

A few years before the general question of neoliberal reforms in the telecommunication sector was raised, stakeholders began to ask how to regulate networks for digital data communication in the late 1970s. Should the networks be nationwide and opened or closed for specific uses and users? Should there be a multitude of networks for individual services or just a limited number that integrated different services? Should data networks be provided by private companies or be subjected to the state monopoly? Computer engineers and companies voted for private data networks, separated from the larger public networks.[29] Closed private networks promised higher profits and custom technical solutions designed for specific purposes. In contrast, the Deutsche Bundespost, still bound to the same regulatory policies and rules defined in the 1970s, emphasised the common welfare and the desire to provide access to digital technologies nationwide.[30] In international and European standard-setting committees, the Bundespost launched concepts such as ISDN, which transformed the existing public monopoly telephone network into a system that allowed for data communication at low transmission rates.[31] As a technology, ISDN reflected the monopolistic style of regulatory policies in the telecommunication sector and the understanding of statehood prevalent the 1970s, but it cleared the path for more diverse services and equipment.[32]

IV. Challenging the monopoly for end devices in the late 1970s

a) Regulatory policy

The debate about the regulation of data communication networks, which was necessary to find a regulatory basis for future data communication research, was an important prelude to the general debate about the deregulation of the telecommunication sector. It is important to highlight that there was no powerful force in a position to oppose the Deutsche Bundespost. Neither computer manufacturers such as Nixdorf or Kienzle[33] nor neoliberal economists, politicians or other societal groups (entrepreneurs) succeeded in making their voices heard. Supporters of a monopoly like the Social Democrat Chancellor Helmut Schmidt blocked proposals for a deregulation of the telecommunication sector.[34] Nevertheless, neoliberal concepts, the privatisation of telecommunication and the individual freedom of choice did not vanish from public discourse. On the contrary, liberal parties, liberal thinking groups within society and the press demanded more freedom of choice and a partial privatisation of the telecommunication sector to increase the quality of services and technologies.[35] Even the German parliament's monopoly commission voted in favour of a deregulation of markets, at least for end devices. The government, however, took the view that the request for more individual freedom of choice should be met within the monopoly. The only exception was the opening up of the market for telefax devices in 1978. The Liberal Party's minister of economic affairs, Lambsdorff, was able to limit the Deutsche Bundespost's monopoly to a market share of 20% in that particular segment. Faced with changing technologies and increasing market share losses in the international sales of telecommunication equipment, the government changed its policy only within the framework of the monopoly.[36]

The Deutsche Bundespost also argued for a gradual transition towards more competition for end devices and services within the monopoly infrastructure of the telephone network. Like the government, the Bundespost feared that unregulated competition on the markets for (digital) telecommunications would have a negative impact on the telecommunication sector as a whole, because the different modes of communication were strongly linked. The Bundespost's technical department and its leading engineers in particular opted for a cautious approach

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27 Röhr, *Gebremste Vernetzung*.

28 Röhr, *Home Computer*, 115–129.

29 Haigh, *ENIAC in Action*; Ceruzzi, *Inventing the Internet*; Albers, *Hacking Europe*.

30 Wiechert, *Das Recht des Fernmeldewesens,* Witte, *Telekommunikation*.

31 Rutkowski, *Integrated Services Digital Network*.

32 Sondergutachten der Monopolkommission (1981), in: Bundesarchiv Koblenz, B257/59510–59511.

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33 Müller, *Kienzle. Ein deutsches Industrieunternehmen*.

34 Süß, *A 'New Social Question'*.

35 Hüttig, *Die Deregulierung*.

36 Röhr, *Gebremste Vernetzung*.

towards greater competition.[37] They could not deny the zeitgeist, which demanded greater freedom of choice, and the promises of a digital future. However, to protect national companies such as Siemens from US competitors, they advocated the monopoly as a protective shield in the medium-term. The large German market was considered as a stepping stone to build long-term competitiveness on international markets.

The national policy faced a dilemma between different styles of regulatory policy for different segments of the telecommunication markets. The government's monopoly commission was also divided.[38] In this situation, phones and the monopoly for end devices became a focal point in the debate about the deregulation of the telecommunication monopoly and the relationship between the state, the economy and society because phones were the most visible symbol of the monopoly.[39]

b) Phone design

The Deutsche Bundespost responded to the challenges by offering the general public a greater choice within the existing monopoly. The 'icon of uniformity'—the standardised phone model—was transformed into an 'icon expressing individualism' in the hope of appeasing critics of the monopoly. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Bundespost even arranged phone design competitions to meet society's demands.[40] The Bundespost addressed the zeitgeist of growing individualism and a new desire to express individual styles by offering a variety of new phones, ranging from old-fashioned models and built-in table phones to comic-themed models like the Mickey Mouse Telephone.[41] The administration even invented a new name—the design phone (Designfernsprechapparat)—to underline the distinctive image of the new phones.[42] However, both the name itself and the acronym 'DFeAp' instead of 'FeAp' (Fernsprechapparat) for the standard model were a clear reference to the monopoly.

Introduced by the Bundespost in June 1980, the Mickey Mouse Telephone proved to be the most important telephone within the extended offer in terms of distribution, societal significance and representation of the zeitgeist. The phone, officially named DFeAp 322 by the Bundespost, therefore embodied the tensions between the neoliberal and the Keynesian state-centred style of regulation in the telecommunication sector, the tensions within society between sociocultural norms of conformity and individualism or freedom of choice, and the tensions between the old analogue technology and the promises of digital communication.[43] The Mickey Mouse Telephone was an icon of 'individualistic' US culture, reflecting society's needs, desires and values in the early 1980s.[44] Therefore it seemed the perfect choice for the Bundespost and the intended purpose of the series of design phones. The model was advertised as fun for young and old Mickey Mouse fans and a 'must have' for all those working professionally with children.[45]

Fig. 3: Advertisement catalogue of the Bundespost in the 1980s.

At the same time, the Mickey Mouse Telephone clearly highlighted Germany's technological inferiority in comparison to other manufacturers supplying the international telecommunication equipment markets.

Even at its launch in 1980, the Mickey Mouse Telephone was perceived as an antagonism by itself. A neoliberal promise of a freedom of choice, indi-

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37 Stellungnahme der Deutschen Bundespost zu Sondergutachten der Monopolkommission, Bundesarchiv Koblenz B257/18272.

38 Metzler, *Ein deutscher Weg.*

39 Wettbewerbsuntersuchungen bei der Deutschen Bundespost durch die Monopolkommission, in: Bundesarchiv Koblenz, B257/35340.

40 Vertrieb von Telefonapparaten 1980–1989, Bundesarchiv Koblenz, B257/58830–58836.

41 Stellungnahme der Deutschen Bundespost zur Kurzfassung des Sondergutachtens der Monopolkommission, in: Bundesarchiv Koblenz, B257/18272.

42 Werbung für Telefon Nebenstellenanlagen 1980er, Bundesarchiv Koblenz, B257/45864–45866.

43 Baumann, *Anschluss unter Mickey Maus Nummer*, 35.

44 Forbes, *Mickey Mouse as Icon*, 242–252.

45 Vertrieb von Telefonapparaten 1980–1989, Bundesarchiv Koblenz, B257/58830–58831.

vidualism and (technological) progress, the model was supplied by a monopoly provider, the Deutsche Bundespost, with an outdated analogue technology. It was built by the manufacturing company Alois Zettler under licence from Disney, but equipped with analogue technology to ensure compatibility with the German telephone network's standards. Hence, it was a symbol both for the aspiration to the 'American way of life' and for the Keynesian style of providing telecommunication services. The phone's technology was a monopoly-type style promising a neoliberal freedom of choice. The antagonism of the Mickey Mouse Telephone triggered widespread criticism of the monopoly and its negative effects. The German journal 'Der Spiegel' complained that "*the production company's manager admitted that the phone technology was outdated before it was launched.*"[46] Telecommunication engineer Ulrich Joachimsen, who was among the most influential advocates for neoliberal reforms, acknowledged that design models like the Mickey Mouse Telephone "*match the furniture, wallpapers, curtains and 'lifestyles', but their 'insides' are simply outdated technology*." He added that "*these end devices might as well have been introduced to the market ten years earlier. Electronic time and check systems would have been much more important than Mickey Mouse.*"[47] For many critics, the Mickey Mouse Telephone turned out to be an icon for a 'failed' step in the neoliberal reform of the telecommunication market. It was an epitome of outdated technology, halfhearted liberalisation and uniformity rather than a symbol of individualism and freedom of choice.

Despite the widespread criticism of the Mickey Mouse Telephone's technology, some saw it as a first step towards neoliberal reform and an expression of a fundamental change in society's norms and values. Helmut Rauschke, member of the managing board at Nixdorf, pointed out that end devices like the Mickey Mouse Telephone were at least "*a first sign for a change in thinking at the Bundespost*". Even the head of the Institute for Communication Technology, Ernst Eggers, appreciated the Mickey Mouse Telephone as "*a first step towards more customer orientation and competition.*"[48]

And yet, the Christian Democrat minister for post and telecommunication, Schwarz-Schilling, stated in the German newspaper 'Wirtschaftswoche' that the Deutsche Bundespost saw no need to change the law for end devices (Fernmeldeanlagengesetz), but strove to use it "*in a liberal and flexible way*."[49] The

Mickey Mouse Telephone's success backed him up. It sold quite well and satisfied society's demand for a diversity of phone models. Effectively, it became an icon for the expression of individualism and for fans of Disney cartoons.

V. Deregulating and privatising the telecommunication sector in the 1980s

a) Regulatory policy

The political landscape for the debate about the deregulation of the telecommunication sector changed when the Social Democrat Chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, was ousted by a vote of no-confidence in 1982. The Liberal Party left the coalition to implement neoliberal policies within a new government.[50] Subsequently, the new Christian Democrat Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, promised comprehensive reforms of the telecommunication monopoly in one of his first government statements.[51]

The most decisive period for the deregulation of the telecommunication monopoly were the mid-1980s when the debate moved on to the transnational level and the pursuit of neoliberal reforms gained traction. European manufacturers of digital telecommunication equipment were losing global market share, prompting the European Commission to push for a new regulatory framework.[52] The Commission's landmark green paper on the future organisation of telecommunication markets in Europe published in 1987 also furthered the debates within the European Community.[53] The Commission had the political power for driving substantial changes and proposed a strategy to implement neoliberal freedom on the European telecommunication markets, putting the questions of competition, network access, obligations for service providers and common European standards on the political agenda. The years between 1988 and 1990 were particularly important as the European Commission was finalising the European single market in general and the regulatory policy for the postal and telecommunication sector in particular.[54] In accordance with its green paper, the European Commission implemented neoliberal concepts by founding the 'European Telecommunications Standardisation Institute' (ETSI) in 1988 and adopting the Directive on competition in the markets

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46 Quoted from: Milliarden sinnlos verpulvert, in: Der Spiegel, 10th September 1979.

47 Quoted from: Würden Sie für ein solches Telefon mehr bezahlen, in: Hobby, 3rd March 1980.

48 Both quoted from: Die Zeit, 26th September 1980.

49 Quoted from: Wirtschaftswoche, 12th November 1982.

50 Henrich-Franke, *Globale Welt*.

51 Metzler, *Ein deutscher Weg*; Handschuhmacher, *Was soll und kann der Staat noch leisten?*

52 CEPT-Koordinationsausschuss für die Harmonisierung von Fernsprechanlagen, Bundesarchiv Koblenz, B257/53149.

53 Ungerer, *Back to the roots*.

54 Bartosch and Braun, *EC Competition*.

for telecommunications in 1990. A full liberalisation of the EU telecommunications markets followed in 1993.

The progression of the debate to the transnational level forced the German government to implement a number of fundamental reforms of the telecommunication sector in Germany, choosing a middle road between neoliberal reforms and a continuation of the monopolies.[55] In a first step, different business divisions were introduced for the different modes of communication (post, telecommunication and radio) in 1989. This was a requirement for the privatisation of the sector, which followed in 1994, when the Deutsche Post and the Deutsche Telekom were converted into publicly listed companies. The new telecommunication law adopted in 1996 established a regulatory authority. The final step was the dissolution of the German ministry for post and telecommunication in 1998.[56]

In summary, the second half of the 1980s and the 1990s saw the implementation of neoliberal freedom on the European markets for telecommunication services. However, due to the strong tensions between old and new approaches to regulation, the debate lasted nearly a decade in Germany, where the Keynesian way of thinking was firmly rooted.

b) Phone design

The Mickey Mouse Telephone with its old technology vanished from the markets when digital networks were implemented at the end of the 1980s. A new generation of fully digital ISDN phones such as the 'Octophon 86', which offered a large number of

new features, came onto the market.[57] The Octophon series was built by the leading German computer technology manufacturer, the Nixdorf Computer AG. Relying on chip technology and other digital features, these phones were marketed as small telecommunication systems offering (data) services such as short information on the display, different local loops and conferencing. The design of these digital telecommunication devices was typically functional and simple.

From 1990, the Mickey Mouse Telephone was no longer discussed as a symbol of the monopolistic telecommunication market or of outdated technology, half-hearted liberalisation and uniformity. It became a cult object and remained a fascinating collectable for the next decades. Ten years after being introduced in the German market, the widely known icon was the inspiration for a parody created by the famous German cartoonist Sebastian Krüger in 'Endlich! Kohl nimmt ab!' (Finally! Kohl picks up the phone/sheds weight!), published in the journal Kowalski in 1990.[58] Remarkably, Krüger's intention was not to portray telecommunication or regulatory policy, but to deride the German Chancellor's at-

Fig. 5: Cartoon Kohl as Mickey Mouse Telephone.

Fig. 4: Octophon 86.

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55 Regierungskommission Fernmeldewesen, *Neuordnung der Telekommunikation*.
56 Engartner, *Der große Postraub*.

57 Telefonprogramme und Vertriebskonzepte, 1987, Bundesarchiv Koblenz, B257/48569.
58 Cover picture of the journal 'Kowalski', 9th September 1990.

tempt to lose weight.[59] At the time, when the Chancellor Kohl had reached the peak of his political career, the Mickey Mouse Telephone was the perfect object to portray Kohl: both the phone and the German Chancellor shared an image of being old-style and funny, but also successful.

VI. Conclusion

The Mickey Mouse Telephone is an icon that succinctly illustrates the fundamental change in the relationship between the state, the economy and society in 1970s and 1980s Germany. It represents the first step away from a Keynesian, state-centred monopoly in the organisation of society and the economy towards the neoliberal freedom of choice and the sociocultural norm of individualism. The Mickey Mouse Telephone responded to the changing norms, values and culture that transformed German society in the 1970s and 1980s—from (mass) conformity in the 1950s and 1960s to a diverse society. Economically, it was the Bundespost's last attempt to defend its monopoly.

The long tradition of state-centred regulatory policy in the telecommunication sector collapsed in the 1980s, when political decision-makers embraced neoliberal economics. It was of particular importance that economic theory shifted from demand-side economics to supply-side economics, which brought end devices such as phones into focus. In addition, with the growing power of the European Commission, telecommunication policy became a transnational question. Germany is a typical example for the long-lasting inertia in the debate about the state monopoly, prompted into action by the European Community.

An antagonism in itself at its market launch in 1980 and a target for the monopoly's critics, the Mickey Mouse Telephone became an iconic cult object from the mid-1980s. It proved to be an economic success, because it satisfied society`s needs for individual expression. With Mickey Mouse, the Bundespost had chosen a perfect icon at a time when American culture and Disney products captured the imagination of the European markets.

The Mickey Mouse Telephone is a prime example for the inherent potential of the transdisciplinary dialogue between economic history, the history of technology and media history. The design of media technology reflects the zeitgeist and reveals a strong correlation between (media) icons, the design of telecommunication technology and economic policy. Placing the Mickey Mouse Telephone between the

'Fernmeldetischapparat 75' and the 'Octophon 86' underlines its role as an artefact and an icon of turning tides.

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Fig. 3: Advertisement catalogue of the Bundespost (undated).
Fig. 5: Cover picture of the journal 'Kowalski', 9th September 1990.