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From comparing media systems to comparing media cultures: Understanding communist television

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The Cold War coincided with the rise of a new mass medium that came to occupy a central place in everyday lives of citizens on both sides of the Iron Curtain. While the historical growth and social impact of television in the west has attracted substantial scholarly attention, research on the medium’s trajectory in the communist world is still rather limited. This paper draws on the results of the Screening Socialism project, financed by the Leverhulme Trust (2013-2016), which developed the first transnational, comparative history of television beyond the Iron Curtain, ranging from the Soviet Union to Yugoslavia. The project relied on a wealth of archival and oral history data from across Eastern Europe and beyond, as well as schedule and programme analysis, thereby bringing to light not only the policies and elite perspectives on the medium, but also offering unique insight into television programming and how the medium was viewed by citizens themselves.

The focus of the paper is on the analytical framework developed for the purpose of the project. This framework offers a novel form of comparative media analysis, which shifts the focus from media systems to media cultures, and investigates how power is exercised through the mediation of particular cultural ideals and narratives and by structuring everyday practices and routines. This analytical approach is underpinned by the conviction that politically significant communication extends well beyond the traditional domains of politics, and encompasses the mediation of basic assumptions about the spatial and temporal organization of the world we inhabit: our perceptions of private and public life, our understanding of the nation and its position in the world, the way we organize our daily life, the festive occasions we look forward to, or the historical events we remember and celebrate. In line with this, television is conceived as a medium with distinct spatial and temporal dimensions, which shape social relationships across private, public, national and transnational spaces, as well as structure attitudes to the passage of time. Using this framework, the project investigated communist television cultures both cross-nationally and longitudinally, and used both axes of comparison to offer not only an original descriptive account of communist television trajectories, but also an explanation of why these trajectories developed in the way they did, and how they differed from developments elsewhere in the world.