

**GRAFFITI ON THE WALL:
Reading History Through News Media:
The role of news media in historical crises, in the case
of the collapse of the Eastern bloc in Europe 1989.**

Thesis submitted by

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FRONTISPIECE

What is news?

“Journalism – especially political journalism – is often akin to having the best seat in the grandstand. You get to watch, abuse, dissect and pontificate, safe in the knowledge you’ll never have to pull on a jumper and cop a tackle.” Matt Price, “Journalists under fire from Senate inquiry”, The Australian – Media, 9-15.5.02

“Nobody knows what news is important until a hundred years afterwards.” Friedrich Nietzsche

Social movements

*“And the words that are used
For to get the ship confused
Will not be understood as they’re spoken.
For the chains of the sea
Will have busted in the night
And will be buried at the bottom of the ocean...
... And the ship’s wise men
Will remind you once again
That the whole wide world is watchin’.”* Bob Dylan, “When the Ship Comes In”

“Collective action ... can offer even resource-poor groups opportunities ... and it can pry open institutional barriers through which their demands an pour.” Sidney Tarrow

“We can’t continue with this anarchist democracy, with everything based on good will and working twenty-two hours a day. We shall have to change into a proper, organised political force.” Jan Urban, Civic Forum, Prague, December 1989

Change in Europe

“What would things have been like if ... during periods of mass arrests ... people had not simply sat there in their lairs, paling with terror at every bang on the downstairs door and every step on the staircase, but had understood they had nothing left to lose and had boldly set up in the downstairs hall an ambush of half a dozen people?” Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Gulag Archipelago

“Communism was overthrown by life, by thought, by human dignity.” Vaclav Havel, 1992

“Wer sind ein Volk.” Leipzig 18.12.89

“If Europe were once again united in the sharing of its common heritage, there would be no limit to the happiness, to the prosperity and glory which its three or four hundred million people would enjoy... We must build a kind of United States of Europe.” Winston Churchill, Zurich, September 1946

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Photograph 1 Previous page; breach of the Berlin Wall (AAP)

Photograph 2 Scene at West German Embassy, Prague
2.10.89

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Photograph 3 Confrontation at Government – Civic Forum
negotiations, Prague, 26.11.89

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ABSTRACT

The thesis reviews the engagement of news media in the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989, most vividly represented by the opening of the Berlin Wall. It uses field observations of the author as a journalist of the time, extensive interviews with other news correspondents, a review of historical writing on the period, and an exhaustive review of the coverage given by six major news outlets. The work sees the change in Europe being driven by mass social movements, but also examines conventional, institutional politics at work, and describes the engagement of news media in the historical situation as it unfolds. It determines that the daily coverage by leading Western news media judged in terms of accuracy and perspective was successful, validated by later evaluations. It is informed by theoretical writing on mass social movements and on journalistic news values. It concludes by suggesting that the approach followed, a review of history from the perspective of news media of the day, could be applied to many other situations.

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Number of news reports and features on the topics listed
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Coverage of ABC Radio and Television, News and Current Affairs
Number of news and current affairs reports identified in survey

STATEMENT OF SOURCES

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

Signature

Date

PREFACE

The idea of conducting this study occurred to me at some point while working in eastern Europe in 1989, in the street, probably in East Berlin. It was obvious to all that an historical change was under way, moving towards outcomes we could not imagine. It was obvious also that journalists had an invaluable vantage point for seeing and understanding what took place. Their vulnerability, obviousness as a group often wielding bulky equipment, and exposure to harm, could be traded against the fact of their being valued by many as witnesses and neutrals, their ability to expose misdeeds to public view, their officially protected status in many situations, and unlike protestors, police or other actual protagonists, their licence to leave the scene or drift into the background at any time. It could be considered also that the significance of the journalists' presence had intensified over the preceding few decades, as the number of foreign correspondents in the field had increased, and new technologies – especially satellites and advanced telephony- meant their surveillance and output was more pervasive, rapid and immune to most forms of control.

My own position was particularly advantageous because it permitted, more often required attendance at almost all of the major events as the crisis unfolded. As European Correspondent of the Australian ABC based in a single-correspondent office at the European Commission in Brussels, I was designated to maintain a cover of continental Europe, together with journalists at a bureau in London. The Corporation's editorial managers emphasised direct gathering in the field "by our own correspondents". Unlike other organisations such as the BBC there was no network of correspondents in Europe to pick up the story in different locations, so it fell to the European Correspondent to follow the action from place to place. Though several correspondents from different organisations each appeared at many places and had access to excellent information on the rest, few individuals had occasion personally to make the full tour of events in this way.

The work was constant and preoccupying; it was no time to approach questions which I was putting to myself: What is being done or undone in terms of ongoing relations within the human family, and what is the full significance of these historic events? What difference will be made by having this enormous presence on the part of news media, and the coverage they produce? In other terms: What manner of event is being witnessed? What does it show about

how the news media work? What place does the news media have in the formation of the outcomes? The journalistic work done at the time was in effect a first stage of field work for the project to follow. Looking for answers then required systematic research and writing . The thesis presented here is the main outcome.

SYNOPSIS

The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe was a pivotal event in contemporary history, re-shaping the balance of international power and the freedoms and prospects of the populations of several countries. It was a dramatic political transformation from the time when, a few years before, nearly all the communist regimes were imagined as being entrenched, with hopes of change seeming to be an illusion. However under the force of mass social movements, after a short period of crisis, the old orders were overthrown and much more democratic regimes were born. Further sweeping changes were anticipated as a consequence, through German reunification and the integration of European states.

This transformation was a test for international news media in terms of accuracy and perspective. The reporting of change and crisis, and of social movements when the power situation is fluid and uncertain, is much more complex than reporting institutional leaders' statements and activities during times of stability. Moreover the news media were not only reporting events, but were implicated in their development, as the intensity of international attention affected the actions and strategies of the participants.

This thesis studies the reporting of developments among the elite Western news media. It does so through an intensive and comprehensive review of news content in six media outlets over the most crucial, six-month period, which begins in August 1989, encompasses the fall of the Berlin Wall and finishes with the preparations for German reunification. It does so also through in-depth interviews with 23 journalists who covered these events, and through participant observation, based on the author's own experiences as a journalist at that time.

The study finds that news reporting provided a reliable guide to the unfolding events. That is checked against histories written since, which have tended to confirm the main themes of the coverage provided on the day by the international media. The reporters faced major tasks but none felt they lived under pressure from home desks or other sources to distort their account of events. They found that relations with the emerging social movements were mutually beneficial,

though still needing to be balanced with attention to conventional politics. On the whole the journalists were able to trust their own judgments about the significance of breaking news, and overall these judgments were vindicated.

The study also finds that the media reporting interacted with the developing crises in the countries under study. The intense international publicity emboldened and galvanized the mass social movements. It provided them with an extemporised resource for mobilising support. While the mass social movements are identified as fundamental in bringing on change, main factors in institutional politics, notably the attempted Soviet reform program under Gorbachev, are also explained in this study – and the connections with journalistic activity are examined.

While the rhythm of news coverage was generally appropriate, reflecting the substantial importance of developments, there were strengths and weaknesses. The panel of journalists, with the support of outside material evidence, (the verdict of more orthodox histories; their own reportage checked after a decade), can point to successes. These would include fast and adroit appreciation of the potential impact of the East German government's decision to begin opening its frontiers. On the other hand there are perceived lapses. For instance wildly distorted information about the December violence in Romania got into the coverage; and German journalists have reproached themselves over compliant treatment of government promises of a “blooming” economic future, as a result of rapid reunifications.

With more than a decade's perspective, histories since the fall of communism have generally vindicated the contemporary accounts given by quality international media. “Tabloid” media have not been studied here, but it is suggested they should not be wholly excluded from these positive findings as journalism across the board has many shared qualities.

Theoretical writing is consulted on both the phenomenon of mass social movement and the conventional news values self-consciously referred to by journalists as representing principles underpinning their work.

In the comparative section bringing together the elements of observation study, interviews, review of historical writing, and review of media contents, news media are seen as having been ubiquitous in the crisis, working autonomously close to the centre of events. An argument is then made that in general, future historical crises may be studied effectively from the

perspective of news media. It is posited that media resources - organisations, professional cadre, archived products- have been made especially potent by advanced communication and research technology. Using this study of the Eastern Europe crisis as the lead example, a framework or model is proposed whereby such events can be understood by reconstructing the news media's handling of them.