

The problems of the Europe television model

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The first thing revealed by an analysis of the audiovisual policies which have traditionally been pursued by different countries in the Europe Union is the diversity of existing television models. That diversity finds its historical justification in the fact that when the medium of television began to expand on the Old Continent after the end of the Second World War, Europe was torn by such deep rifts that any idea of a common European identity made absolutely no sense at all. The European countries today are well aware that the ideas of nation-state and national culture that developed in the 19th century were at the root of the two world wars. And for Europeans at the time, above and beyond any political and economic differences between the states, there prevailed a reciprocal feeling of strangeness: they knew one another very little and not very well.

In that Europe which looked with scant favour on the idea of a community, television emerged, and it is not surprising that its history reflects that sense of difference and strangeness. There is no reason to think that in such a social and political context it would have been possible for the different television systems to have been directed towards common solutions from the outset. And so, in each country television -and with it audiovisual policies- was constructed in relation to its own society and became a medium that reaffirmed its own specific cultural traditions. The past, present and future of European television are closely linked to the political, social and cultural evolution of European society.

In Germany television took on a function of social and family cohesion, aimed at the middle class, from the beginning. The programmes were contaminated by an obsession with a recent past marked by defeat in the war and the resulting division of the country, whose outcome was a particular fragmentation of national culture which expressed itself in a federalism which was also applied to television. To make up for that fragmentation, German television provided extremely centralised daily information and the television news became a meeting point for German families.

In Great Britain, on the other hand, television in the early post-war years was identified with the culture of the upper classes and reaffirmed a sense of British identity still nourished by imperialist politics. All BBC programmes at the time were aimed at creating a harmonious balance between social groups, national and monarchic culture, modelled on "upper middle class" values. The overall educational purposes of British television at the time were expressed in popular science productions and the Open

University experiment. In short, it was in Great Britain where television first became an instrument of higher education, as can be seen from the excellent quality of the news broadcasts. English television was launched with a determination to provide quality contents which it was to maintain over the years.

At the opposite extreme we find the evolution of television in France, which, after early rejection by the intellectual elite, soon displayed a populist tendency that was to become more marked with the passage of time and was expressed in products which activated the mechanisms of light entertainment and variety. French television became a faithful mirror of the political evolution of the country (excessive centralism, TV as an instrument of power, etc), while showing a strong determination to defend the national identity and the country's destiny to take on the leadership of Europe through constant investigation of national technical and cultural discoveries, which in the end led it to adopt different standards from those of other European televisions.

Meanwhile, post-war Italy was deeply divided regionally and politically and also suffered from high levels of illiteracy. The initial function of Italian television was thus cultural promotion, and it became one of the decisive instruments of linguistic unification.

However, in spite of the marked differences in the audiovisual policies implemented by the different countries of the European Union, there is talk of a "European television model" as opposed to the "American model". That is because television throughout Europe emerged and has evolved under a single principle: public service, as opposed to the American model of an industry controlled by private interests and subject to the laws of the market. All European televisions, without exception, have followed a common historical evolution: from the original desire for state control of broadcasting, production and distribution, by way of the common problems of the sixties concerning the need for new sources of financing (inclusion of advertising) and the crisis of public television that became apparent in the seventies (conflict between public service and the need to win audiences), to the process of deregulation of European audiovisual media and the emergence of the private-commercial television channels from the mid-eighties.

In France, the process was triggered off by the law passed by the socialists in 1982 which enabled the creation of La Cinq, M6 and Canal Plus, completed later by the Léotard Act of 1985 which brought about the privatisation of TF1 and the new concessions for La Cinq and M6 (the former disappeared and the latter was transformed into a music channel). In Germany the public monopoly was broken through the extension of the cable television network which receives satellite signals, in spite of the limitations imposed by the *Länder* on the privatisation of terrestrial hertz transmitters. Britain is the country where the model has been most faithfully maintained, given the limited development of the cable network and the lack of general acceptance of satellite television. In the case of Britain, it is not so much a privatisation of television as a diversification of supply under the strict guardianship of the state. In Italy, however, privatisation took place ahead of other countries and was not preceded

by any law to regulate expansion. The result of privatisation in Italy was a huge increase in the flow of American films and series, parallel to the increase in the number of broadcasting hours, the number of channels and the range of programmes.

The seventies saw the beginning of a process which has gradually led to a profound transformation of the relation between television and national cultures. On the one hand, there is a clear preference on the part of audiences in every country for home-made programmes in what some people have called a "television neo-nationalism", which derives from national cultural feelings and the undeniable reigning anti-American atmosphere in Europe. Which stands in contrast to the installation of a mixed television system in Europe, which accepts the idea of the American television model and requires state television companies to produce ratings results, subjecting the educational or training functions of the small screen to the laws of the market.

Financing problems in European television and the increasingly decisive importance of advertising in the medium have called into question the educational purpose which used to be attributed to the European television model; a purpose which has been overtaken by economic interests and has brought about a gradual discarding of its traditional cultural and political concepts. The mixed television system which has now taken over (public channels living side by side with private ones) is fraught with ambiguities and contradictions. The public channels enter into a competitive, not complementary, relationship with the private ones with a programming that is homogenised downwards and forces them to cut up the advertising cake into minute pieces, since it does not grow at a sufficient rate to finance them all. In that context, the public channels can no longer justify their double source of financing and will have to opt for a return to the public service function or give up their state financing altogether.

The fact is that the European television scene has been swamped by American products which, oddly enough, never reach the top places in the audience ratings. This is an issue with a host of nuances. On the one hand, it has to be borne in mind that it is far more expensive to produce one's own fiction than to acquire well-made American products which, since they have already made enough profits in the home market, can be offered abroad at extremely competitive rates. On the other hand, the audiovisual productions of each country in the European Union add to problems of cost the difficulties of distribution in a broad European market. It would be false to claim that there is a "European public" strictly speaking; the themes and the workmanship of Europe fiction products are excessively parochial, since national cultural and linguistic differences carry considerable weight in European audiovisual production.

The solution is obvious but complicated. A priori, and from the point of view of the number of potential consumers, the European audiovisual sector has a market of 350 million inhabitants (120 million homes), which is far larger than the American domestic market. But in practice that market is fragmented "nationally", and in objective terms that becomes an almost local or regional fragmentation. The absence of that large market of consumers makes local production far more expensive, takes away

competences from national initiatives and ends up by leaving European television an easy prey to the all-conquering American product.

Moreover, the increase in the range of television on offer in Europe arising from the emergence of the private channels, the development of the cable network and satellite television has brought about a demand for audiovisual products which European production is currently in no position to meet. Even though it has been proved that each European country has developed a specific policy of "anthropological television" on the basis of teleseries which occupy the top places in the audience ratings, it would be difficult for that fiction product to come up with a content that would be identifiable or interesting for audiences other than in the country of origin. Successful television productions in each country would be difficult to export to others in Europe.

The technological difficulties that once shed doubt on the creation of a European television have been overcome and now all the countries of the European Union seem to be aware of the growing need to create that European audiovisual market, which will be able to supply the different European channels, to be exported to other continents and to create a common European television space. Simultaneously, after fifty years of history of television in Europe, the original idea that the continent was orchestrated by specific historical entities which were estranged from one another is gradually giving way to an acceptance of the concept of Europe as a common cultural identity. Respect for European cultural diversity and plurality is no longer seen as an insuperable obstacle, but as the main and most productive characteristic of the European Union. Nevertheless, we should not deceive ourselves: the will to create a common Europe space is due more to economic causes than any cultural aspirations.

The future community television has to overcome the weight of customs and frontiers if it is to be capable of articulating a relationship between cultural identity and the pan-European coverage space of its products. There is a need to set up, under the auspices of the Europe Commission, a community legal framework which can provide common solutions to the problems of each European country in terms of legislation on television advertising, the sources of financing for public television channels and their obligation to provide a public service; on copyright and a homogeneous regulation of cable and satellite television broadcasts. Lastly, it has to develop a common policy on incentives for production and distribution of its own audiovisual material and European co-production.

From that point of view, European television of the future must be pluralist, since the European sign of identity is based precisely on a respect for its inherent linguistic, cultural and national diversity and plurality. In an analysis of the prospects for the future of European audiovisual production, we cannot speak of European television in the singular; we must use the plural. A hypothetical European television cannot be either single or inspired by a single model and, most likely, from the many national televisions of today we shall pass on to the many European televisions or models of television.

The possibility of creating a general interest European television channel therefore seems barely viable. The French experience in the creation of a pan-European satellite channel within the opening of the market in 1993 was frustrated by the weakness of transnational public investment and the language barriers that forced them to reconsider the projects and base them on homogeneous language zones. But although language is undeniably a barrier to the creation of a single European television (which can be overcome by the development of dual systems and audio translation of broadcasts in real time), even more of one is an audience's feeling of belonging and identification with a particular national television.

Most likely the European television model will end up in a variety of organisation types (public, private, mixed, regional, national, supranational, cable or satellite, free or pay TV), though that will not mean disparity. At present that future trend can be discerned with the appearance of supranational satellite television channels -such as Canal Satélite- which opt for a special interest European television which can arouse the interest of a large segment of the community audience with common interests: sport, music, documentaries, cartoons, etc. Everything points to the fact that the prospects for European television in the future are plural. The traditional supply of general interest television will be maintained, but will not be totally dominant; it will live alongside complementary and special interest Europe television models.

On that hypothetical European audiovisual scene, general interest television channels, whether public or private, are the ones which, through their historical legacy, are more closely linked to national or local culture, which is why their programming will have to pay attention to strictly "national" peculiarities (anthropological programming, national news broadcasts, fostering the local language) and offer a lightweight schedule aimed at a large indiscriminate mass: a family TV, the target of mass consumption advertising. The experience of British general interest television makes it possible to defend the argument that there is no reason why general interest television in the future should necessarily be vulgar or represent the lowest common denominator. Simply it must be assumed that its contents will have to be "slimmed down" to satisfy the tastes of a heterogeneous public which, for that very reason, shows a greater tendency to internationalism in programming formulae. The problems of the general interest television of the future will not be so much finding their own characteristic supply as defining their sources of financing, especially in the case of public television.

The European television models with the brightest future seem to be the complementary and special interest ones. Complementary TV -not necessarily pay TV- is aimed at a segment of the audience which is not involved in the typical family television audience of general interest TV. A minority segment in national terms, foreseeably made up of young people living in large urban groups, who are far less attached to local or national culture and show a marked tendency to internationality. That may well be the market with the greatest potential for European production, since although that audience segment may be a minority in each country, in the European Union as a whole it becomes a major consumer market in terms of both quantity and

quality. And that is the great attraction for the catchment of the advertising resources which find in complementary TV a specific target for their products, thus making the investment more profitable.

Lastly, the possibilities for the development of a set of special interest European television channels, basically via cable and satellite, take the shape of the catchment of an extremely sectorial and currently scattered public. It is the very sectorial character of that audience that leads one to think that access to special interest television supply will only be possible on pay TV, as happens in the United States. Within the multiplicity of the supply, the cultural dimension of that type of television occupies a consistent space, which is why everything points to it becoming an object of differentiated programming, not limited to national spheres and able to offer great opportunities for the expansion of Europe television production based on the concept of genre.

That outlook, which is strongly directed towards pluralism and differentiation, enables us to think of the possibility of introducing a relation between cultural activity and television activity, but in different terms from the present ones, and in any case a relation which is neither global nor subject to political control. Technological progress makes it possible to multiply reception capacity and give the viewers new opportunities to select from what is on offer.

That is why we can conceive the future European television scene as an extremely articulated market, in which mediocrity and cultured, sophisticated programmes will exist side by side. A scene made from pluralism and diversity of audiovisual supply in which the cultural and linguistic identity of each European country will live harmoniously with the feeling of belonging to a "European supra-nation". A scene which will be capable of engendering a plural European television system, robust and competitive internationally.

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