

Local television in Catalonia: a model undergoing extensive transformation¹

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- *The way in which local television (LTV) has been interpreted in Catalonia has evolved greatly over the medium's more than twenty-five years of history and has given rise to highly diverse conceptions. The broadcaster models proposed as references have also changed. These modifications are related to both the transformation undergone by LTV itself as well as the proposals made via policies, and also the conceptualisation based on Catalan research. The article covers this evolution and takes an interpretative approach to explain which changes have occurred and the factors behind them.*

Keywords

Local television; Catalonia; concept; model; broadcaster; evolution

Introduction: the constant (re)definition of the model of local television in Catalonia

The implementation of terrestrial digital television (TDT) in Catalonia has led to the full legal recognition of local television (LTV) in the Principality. This medium was born in the early eighties and since then developed without a complete legal framework until 2005 (Garriga, 1985; Prado and Moragas, 1991; OCL, 2005).

But TDT has also led to the implementation of a highly specific model of LTV. Policies of state and Catalan governments have focused on business-type television that is well-provided for professionally and economically, capable of competing in the broadcasting market in the case of private television and providing a quality public service in public television and particularly with the capacity to stimulate the Catalan broadcasting industry.

However, this model is not the only one that has been proposed in local Catalan television's more than twenty-five years of history. In fact, a whole series of highly varied and even contradictory models has been formulated and co-existed. The model that is to be implemented with TDT is diametrically opposed to the model that is hegemonic in its creation and early development: a popular, amateur LTV that aspired to democratise communication (Guimerà, 2006).

¹ This article is based on research carried out by the author in producing his doctoral thesis entitled *La televisió local a Catalunya (1976-2005): gestació, naixement i transformacions* (Local television in Catalonia (1976-2005): gestation, birth and transformations), read in November 2006 at the Department of Journalism and Communication Science of the Autonomous University of Barcelona. The author would like to thank the lecturer Maria Corominas for both her work on guiding the thesis and the comments and suggestions made for this article.

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The keys to understanding the changes in the hegemonic models of LTV in Catalonia during this time are fundamentally four in number. Firstly, the lack of a fully developed legal framework to clearly mark what was local television and what wasn't until the arrival of TDT. Then the changes in criteria of the Spanish and Catalan governments concerning LTV. In spite of the absence of complete regulation, both executive bodies have made public policies on the sector that have evolved from a more civic and public service-based format to an industrial one and they have affected the sector's development. Thirdly, the evolution of the sector itself, going mostly and progressively from popular television to more professional and commercial television. Finally, communication research in Catalonia has also influenced and provided theoretical elements that have served to legitimise (or de-legitimise) some models.

The community model: a guide to birth and early development

The first model applied among Catalan LTV was the community model, defined in the early eighties by Radio Television Cardedeu (RTVC), the first experience in Catalonia and Spain that started up regular broadcasts in March 1982.

The community model is based on five basic pillars: the in-house production of content in Catalan based on news and information; renouncing the profit motive and strict limits to financing through advertising; operations based on citizen involvement; broadcast cover limited to the municipality where they are transmitted; and managed by a non-profit cultural association or a council (Prado, 1985; Meseguer, Rovira and Vilar, 2005).

The proposal was set in writing in 1983 in an Act to define the Cardedeu group, published as a result of one of the various attempts at closure suffered in the early eighties (Garriga, 1985). In a political context marked by the refusal of the Spanish government to tolerate private commercial television stations and the pursuit of any transmission that did not come from Spanish Radio Television (RTVE), RTVC defined a model distanced from commercial projects and befitting public service.

In fact, the community model was born from a highly specific conception of what LTV should be like. Closely linked to

the idea of municipality and district of Barcelona, LTV is related to the notions of citizen involvement, the democratisation of communication and the exercising of recently restored freedoms, especially the freedom of expression. It was conceived as a popular medium with huge potential to structure the territory, to create local collective identities and to reconstruct the nation of Catalonia. LTV also meant resources that were technologically poor but placed at the disposal of everyone. In this respect, it is understood as a socio-cultural activity related to civil militancy and leisure.

The community model was predominant until the end of the eighties for various reasons (Guimerà, 2006: 97-103). On the one hand, because of the success of RTVC which, after 1983, no longer suffered any closure and became a benchmark for the time. In the words of Garriga (2005), one of its promoters, it is the "model of success": it manages to avoid all the political, technical, economic and human limitations and creates a sustainable way of operating in a clearly hostile environment that is not very used to large projects. We should remember that there were only two other LTV with regular broadcasts in Catalonia in 1982. In 1986 there were 24, and most promoters had passed through Cardedeu to learn how to set them up, something that illustrates the importance of RTVC for the whole sector at that time (Guimerà, 2006: 271).

On the other hand, this model became predominant because community television was the only "local television possible" in the early eighties (Guimerà, 2006: 68 and sub.). In other words, it was the only model applicable out of the various models that had been proposed at that time.

First, because of the hostility of the successive central governments in the early eighties towards private profit-making initiatives, both the government of the UCD and of the PSOE, meant that this kind of LTV promoter (such as Anoia TV in 1981) gave up in a legal and political environment that did not guarantee they would be able to do business. Other public projects proposed by professional broadcasters did not get underway, such as a county project promoted by the councils of the Baix Llobregat, also in 1981 (Garriga, 1985).

Afterwards, as from 1983, the supremacy of this model can be explained by the shift towards "conditioned political tolerance" (Guimerà, 2006). That year, after a closure that affected the 12 Catalan LTVs operating at that time (except

for the commercial TV Lloret, all community models), the promoters of RTVC and of the municipal station TV Vallirana (born in 1983 and community-based at that time) negotiated with the central government for tolerance towards their broadcasts, which was accepted. Out of these conversations came the conditions for which they would not be closed down: they could not be profit-seeking, broadcasts were limited to the municipality, they could not interfere in state or Catalan public television nor promote themselves outside the municipality². To a certain extent Cardedeu and Vallirana became the paradigm of tolerated broadcasters and it was therefore ratified that only the community model would be tolerated (Guimerà, 2006).

The birth of the Pro-Legalisation Federation of the Local Television Stations of Catalonia (FPLTVCL) in 1985 also explains the centrality of the model proposed by Cardedeu. Appearing as the result of a proposal by RTVC, it assumed the community model as its own and became the intermediary for the central and Catalan governments and around thirty LTV broadcasters and projects. Moreover, it defended them from administrative closures that, albeit to a lesser extent, were still occurring throughout the eighties. In fact, among the LTV of the eighties there was the belief that, if they belonged to the Federation and declared they followed the community model, the government would not act against them. This was when some broadcasters defined themselves as communities, in order to be *tolerable* and then be able to develop other projects (Meseguer, Rovira and Vilar, 2005; Vilar, 2006).

Moreover, this model had the political approval of Barcelona's provincial government, which had supported the Federation from the start (FPLTVLC, 1986). Finally, it also received the support of Catalan university research into communication. In the eighties, studies on LTV supported the democratising conception proposed. They even claimed that community television was the most legitimate or only legitimate model that gave meaning to the existence of LTV (Prado, 1985; Carreras, 1987).

Professional models: towards the consolidation of Catalan LTV

From the end of the eighties, there was a change in the dominant conception concerning what local television should be like. From that moment on, and increasingly so, it was understood more as a professional matter and not as an amateur socio-cultural phenomenon. A quality comparable to that of broadcasters of a higher level was required and interesting content had to be offered to the audience, well produced by professionals, without any margin for improvisation and aiming for constant commitment in human resource terms.

Based on this premise, increasingly more promoters took decisions aimed at carrying out this kind of LTV. One of the first goals was to improve the financing, something that was achieved in two basic ways. The first, by increasingly including advertising and broadening coverage to include more audience and potential advertisers. The second, combined in some cases with the first, by means of research supported financially by the council and, in some cases, transferring ownership to the town hall.

Professionals were hired with these new resources so as not to depend excessively on voluntary workers, although in many cases these made LTV viable. There was also a tendency to eliminate the assembly-based operational model of the community model and to take decisions through a hierarchy. How programming was conceived also changed, aiming to reduce improvisation associated with amateur operations: those in charge defined the editorial line that had to be followed. In this respect, university research supported the professionalisation in the early nineties and asserted that too much dependence on volunteers could endanger their continuity (Prado and Moragas, 1991).

This new interpretation of LTV was translated into a fast loss of influence of the community model and in the creation of two new ones. On the one hand, the professional public service model, formulated by the Pro-Legalisation Federation of the Local Television Stations of Catalonia, proposed

2 The conditions imposed must be understood within a context in which the central government refused to regulate private television, so promoters of state channels with a commercial purpose used LTV to pressurise the government and to reopen political and media debate (Fernández and Santana, 2000: 313-320).

one single television station per municipality linked to the council: it would own the frequency of the LTV and would finance it through sponsorship, which in turn would make itself available to a non-profit organisation. LTV should provide a high quality public service based on local in-house production by professionals. However, advertising would be allowed to facilitate feasibility and not to overload municipal finance, while the council would be the guarantee that it did not depend on commercial interests (D.A., 1988; FPLTVLC, 1987 and 1994).

On the other hand, what we have called the professional, country-based model (Guimerà, 2006), formulated by the Catalan Federation of Local Television (FCTVL), arising in 1992 from a split in the FPLTVLC, proposed professional private broadcasters (without ruling out the existence of public ones)³, that, locally based, would provide a national public service: broadcasting in Catalan to increase supply in this language. This proposal was a response to the concerns of a group of promoters due to the arrival of private state broadcasters (Tele-5, Antena 3 and Canal+) in the early nineties and the imbalance generated between television in Spanish and in Catalan (FCTVL, 1992; Cumeres, 2006).

The factors that explain this move from the community model to the two professional models are of a diverse nature. On the one hand, some of the promoters who tried to apply the community model felt it was unviable. In fact, the consolidation of broadcasters meant improving finance with public resources (the basis of the public service professional model) and/or with advertising (the basis of the professional, country-based model), in order to fund professionalisation (a real pillar of both new television models). On the other hand, because a group of channels that claimed to be community-based in order to be tolerated and that had become professional and commercial had openly opted for this way (TV Sabadell, TV Lloret). We should therefore note a *tactical use* of the community model in the early years of LTV, as shown by the evolution of the FPLTVLC and the division that gave rise to the FCTVL.

Even the very promoters of the model acknowledged its unviable and tacit nature (FPLTVLC, 1987; Vilar, 2006).

Thirdly, the sector was extensively reorganised between the end of the eighties and the early nineties. Between 1987 and 1992 45 LTV broadcasters were set up and 10 were shut down. Of the new channels, primarily private, most relied on professionalisation and advertising to consolidate their position. Of those that closed down, most hadn't wanted or couldn't opt for this route. The result was that the community channels were already a minority by 1992 (Guimerà, 2006). This explains the appearance and reinforcement of the professional proposals as from the last few years of the eighties.

Finally, the political situation also affected the changes. Between 1988 and 1995 various bills proposed by the central government and the Generalitat opened up debate on which model should be legalised. So operators had to defend what they wanted if they weren't to be left behind. Given this perspective, therefore, the formulation of models became a veritable fight for survival (Guimerà, 2006).

The plurality of models: an eclectic sector searching for full regulation

As from 1995, the hitherto two predominant models gave way to a handful of ideals, none of which managed to become predominant. Proposals included a municipal model with local coverage, a supra-municipal model owned by various bodies (deriving from the public service professional model), and various models of private television at a county or supra-county level (arising from organisations that had proposed the professional and country-based models in the early nineties) (Guimerà, 2006: 190-192).

In spite of their apparent diversity, all the models had in common the desire to be economically viable and, in the case of the private channels, to make a profit. These models are more pragmatic and less ideological than their predecessors: their prevailing logic was now one of financial

3 These promoters managed private channels. One of the reasons for the division of the FPLTVLC was precisely because it defended television channels linked to councils, a model that these promoters avoided (FCTVL, 1992).

viability, combined with a tendency to obtain official approval from channels at a higher level. Now words such as *access* or *citizen involvement* no longer appeared in the discourse.

There are three elements that might explain the appearance of these proposals, starting with a (another) reorganisation of the sector. Of the 66 broadcasters existing in 1997, 35 had been set up in the previous five years. At the same time, of the 61 that broadcast in Catalonia in 1992, 30 had closed down during the same five-year period. In fact, the sector had historic problems of consolidation, especially on the part of private channels. We should note that between 1982 and 1997, 45 out of the 111 television channels stopped broadcasting in Catalonia that had been documented with regular broadcasts over the previous 15 years (40% of the total) (Guimerà, 2006: 152-156 and 272). This suggests that the models had appeared after years of operation, by trial and error.

Secondly, the number of promoters applying business criteria grew, both public and private, especially because this was done by the majority of the new LTV in the period 1992 - 1997. The decline in amateur and popular-based LTV (most of the 45 that disappeared between 1982 and 1997) helps us to understand projects that are far removed from the pioneering proposals.

Finally, we should remember that these models, as in the previous cases, appeared at a time of intense political debate on the regulation of LTV. At the end of what would be the last legislature of the PSOE government in Madrid, the Spanish parliament passed Act 41/1995, on 22 December, regulating local terrestrial television channels (State Bulletin 309, 27 December 1995) based on a bill presented by the PSOE government and with amendments by CiU, PNB and EU-ICV, allies in a minority government. This Act allowed the existence of one television station per municipality and opened the door to creating a second private broadcaster, when the government's initial bill had only included a public broadcaster.

But in 1996 the Partit Popular won the Spanish elections, a party that had voted against the Act. This new government did not completely implement the Act until 2004, within the context of implementing TDT (OCL, 2005). In this context, as from 1997 the Catalan government, in the hands of CiU which was also the parliamentary partner of the minority PP

government in Madrid, negotiated several times to modify the Act in order to be able to apply it. At that time, the Catalan government insisted that it would only support those private initiatives presenting a solvent and economically viable project, something that helps us to understand the nature of the models adopted (Guimerà, 2006: 179-182).

The definitive model: a business and proximity-based approach

Since 2000, the business, professional and commercial idea has grown stronger and LTV now means a medium with increasingly large coverage in order to be able to widen its audience and thereby ensure its viability. LTV is understood as an activity that forms part of an broadcasting market in which these broadcasters have found, in content related to their territory, a brand that allows them to differentiate themselves and to compete.

It is within this context that the implementation of TDT has started to be designed in Spain and in Catalonia. Via several amendments to Act 41/1995 in 2002 and 2003; and with the approval of a National Technical Plan for TDT Frequencies in mid-2004, the PP central government drew up the basic map for digital LTV in Catalonia. The plan divided the Principality into 20 demarcations, grouping together counties and groups of counties. It assigned a multiplex channel to each demarcation with a capacity for four programmes (one of which could be public, to be decided by the autonomous communities), and it forced LTV to emit a minimum of four hours of original programming. In the case that a public channel was created, all the councils included in the demarcation had to agree to manage it. In winter 2004, after a change of government, the new socialist executive modified the technical plan and Catalonia was given 21 demarcations, three of which had two multiplexes. In 2005 it extended the maximum number of public channels per multiplex to two. The design created in Madrid therefore determined the model.

However, the choice of TDT technology also involves high broadcasting costs, which limit it further. In 2005 the prices were published for the incumbent operator in Catalonia, Abertis Telecom, going from a little over 170.000 to more than 1.7 million euros (*El Periódico de Catalonia*, 7 October

2005, page 40). Although the final prices are still to be decided, the amounts stated make it difficult for an amateur approach and require a solvent financial structure. From this perspective, it is understood that the county is the minimum unit to ensure viability, breaking the relationship between the municipality and broadcaster that had existed when LTV first started⁴.

Given the technological choice by TDT and the design from Madrid, the diversity of references in the second half of the nineties gave way to a certain consensus among most operators and Catalan bodies with authority over communication policies (the government and the Audiovisual Council of Catalonia, with authority to organise the broadcasting system since 2000), which took the name of "proximity-based local television". This model, coherent with the technological conditioning factors and the business-based conception dominant at the time, determined a professional operator and a business approach (which had been defended by the leading associations since the end of the eighties) and no longer discussed ownership, which was controlled by law (Guimerà, 2006).

Now the key was content: programming had to be related to the territory and focused on the community it was addressing (i.e. proximity), although the reference point was no longer the municipality but the county or supra-county demarcation. In the case of public television channels, the government forced the councils to offer this programming⁵. In the case of private channels, the conditions for tenders clearly stated that content was a key element⁶. Act 22/2005, of 29 December concerning broadcasting in Catalonia (Official Gazette 4543, 3 January 2006), circulated after tenders had been opened out, extends this concept to the point that it always talks of "local television" and "proximity-based television" as synonyms.

This concept is due to academic contributions on *proximity-based television*, a notion introduced into Catalonia at the end of the nineties and applied for the first time to LTV by Prado and Moragas (2002). And its influence does not stop here, as the government, when designing the conditions for its local TDT tender, consulted various Catalan researchers who had studied proximity-based television, both private and public (Ramentol, 2006: 28).

The reasons behind the predominance of the proximity model are very diverse in nature. Firstly, the economic and business elements are determined by TDT technology. Secondly, there is a consensus among organisations representing the sector, the government and the CAC, that television must strengthen the Catalan broadcasting industry. Since 2000, the government has understood that LTV forms part of a system that includes national television (public and private) and broadcasting production, which has become economically strategic for Catalonia (CAC, 2006; Madí, 2007; Marín, 2007).

However, the government's desire to stimulate the industry in Catalonia first concerns the Catalan operators, something it aims to achieve with a link to the territory. So the intention behind the design is that the maximum number possible of analogue television channels can go over to TDT and, at the same time, to avoid the implementation of Spain-wide networks that had landed in Catalonia early on in this decade (Localia TV; Urbe TV, Vocento) (*Antena Local*, no. 42, page 10; no. 44, page 7).

The sector has also grown in its number of broadcasters, reaching 120 in 2004, two thirds of which were private and the vast majority professional. The driving force behind this growth has been, fundamentally, companies from other sectors of the communication industry (press, radio) and

4 The county-based design of the demarcations received criticism for how it had divided the country, both from the sector and also from the Catalan government. However, on very few occasions, or even never, was it criticised with the same force as when the minimum unit was the county (Guimerà, 2006: 248 and sub.).

5 DECISION PRE/2804/2005, 27 September, publicising the Agreement of the government of 20 September 2005, establishing the procedure for granting local digital television programmes to the municipalities of Catalonia included in the demarcations established in the current national technical plan for local digital television and the legal regime for these (Official Gazette 4482, 4 October 2005).

6 Government of the Generalitat of Catalonia (2005): *Plec de clàusules administratives particulars i de prescripcions tècniques del contracte de gestió de servei públic de televisió digital local*. Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalonia.

from another level (local and county, national, state) and clearly business-based. So the majority discourse within the sector is the business discourse of the private sector, to which we should add the professionalism defended by an increasingly large number of Catalan councils with a television channel (OCL, 2005).

An exclusive model: historical television channels and alternative concepts

With the implementation of local TDT, the complete professionalisation and industrialisation of the sector became practically inevitable. With high economic investment and high operation costs deriving from the technological requirements and the model of digital broadcaster established, this new broadcasting system could lead to the disappearance of popular and amateur LTV.

The impact on the operational reality of Catalonia is already being noticed in the tenders for concessions for private television channels. Although the model was designed to allow as many LTV as possible to be set up, a group of eight channels that were broadcasting in 2004, one year before the tender, did not present a bid. Their promoters felt that TDT did not allow them to develop their model: popular, amateur, with municipal coverage and a profile that is closer to the community. Among these are the pioneering RTV Cardedeu and Vilassar TV, with more than 20 years' broadcasting experience.

These channels have come together in the Catalan Federation of Historical Local Television Channels and have asked the government and CAC to help them to continue broadcasting, appealing to chapter VI of Act 22/2005, concerning the right to exist of non-profit and proximity-based broadcasting media⁷. So, at a time of the full professionalisation and commercialisation of local television channels, once again we can hear voices demanding the validity of approaches similar to the original ones.

Conclusions: between the concept, models and practice

During its twenty-five years of history, Catalan local television has had four broad predominant models: the community model until the end of the eighties, the public service professional model and the country-based professional model throughout the nineties and the proximity-based model as from the beginning of this century. The differences that can be easily observed between the start and end in the evolution of the models throughout the years show the huge extent of the change. In fact, the model on which the sector is now regulated is diametrically opposed to that designed at the birth and spread of LTV based on the experience of RTV Cardedeu.

Concerning the nature of this transformation, all the indications and evidence gathered suggest that the relationship between the concept of local television, the models that define it and the practice of broadcasters is not lineal nor deterministic, but the example of a character we have called *circular*: all three maintain a dialogue and mutually influence each other.

An initial example can be found in the gradual abandonment of the reference to community: everyday activity reveals that, applied in a strict sense as had been proposed, this was very difficult to sustain. This revelation leads to the elements that characterise the two subsequent professional models in the early nineties: hiring staff, the growing use of advertising and/or stable municipal funding. In turn, these ingredients have guided the transformation of LTV from the early eighties, something which gives rise to the increasingly more professional notion and a tendency towards commercialisation. Moreover, the television channels that disappear over the years are those that don't want to or can't move beyond their amateur status, something that weakens this kind of broadcaster even more.

The proximity-based model and the implementation of TDT are the opposite case: the definition of a professional ideal with an business format based on public policies (and

⁷ The Assembly of Social Communication (ACS) could also follow the same course, being a collection of groups that have been trying to set up community television in Barcelona since the start of the decade.

with the consensus of most of the sector) determines what kind of broadcaster can migrate to TDT. This approach helps to explain the refusal of the pioneering RTV Cardedeu to bid for tender, together with a further seven private broadcasters of a voluntary nature. Although this model shows the evolution undergone by LTV to some extent and how this is seen by its operators, it leaves other existing models out of the mix.

It is from this circular perspective that we can observe how broadcasting models are always proposed within contexts of possible recognition or legal tolerance and regulation of LTV, in a sector that has developed over twenty-five years without a complete legal framework. Going from the community model to the proximity model, passing through the professional models of the nineties, must be understood in this respect, as they form part of the legitimising and defensive discourse of certain broadcasters who aim to influence policies so as not to be outside the law (or the sector). Research supporting (or not) the different models has played a key part in this discourse, to the extent where this evolution cannot be explained without its help.

In this respect, therefore, the concerns of operators at each point in the development of LTV, combined with the interests of public policies on the sector (which do not always coincide with the former), are the driving force behind the extensive transformation of the concept and models of broadcaster existing in Catalonia since the birth of the phenomenon to the implementation of TDT.

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