

Public television in Europe: different perspectives to face the challenge

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Within the framework of the 10th International Congress of Communication (Navarre University, 10 and 11 November 2005), European public television was analysed from different interdisciplinary perspectives by professionals and academics from the sector. In more than 800 pages, the book being reviewed, *Los desafíos de la televisión pública en Europa*, recounts the talks and communications of the congress. In spite of its length, it is clearly divided into themed blocks: regulation and the legal framework, the market and business management, quality in programme production and attention to social minorities, social pluralism and citizen involvement, and promoting digital technology.

“Public television in Europe is at a time of crisis. Perhaps the biggest in its history” (page 13). The book starts with this categorical statement, which appears at an opportune, interesting and decisive time for the public broadcasting sector, with factors of change and doubts regarding the future: the passing of the Act on the Catalan Corporation of Broadcasting Media (CCMA), the restructuring of the RTVE Corporation (CRTVE), the transition to digital terrestrial television (TDT), the need for a state broadcasting council, etc. in terms of our closest context. And, within the context of Europe, the review and updating of the European Directive for television without frontiers (TWF), the possible privatisation of RAI and the budget cuts for the BBC are all examples of this.

In spite of the different perspectives from which public television is tackled in Europe in this book, as well as a certain imbalance regarding the extension and development of themes, we find common elements that, in some cases more than others, are repeated throughout the pages: competition between public and private television reopens debate concerning identity, objectives, funding and the quality of

the public sector in a dual market. So, many of the talks and communications suggest that the traditional principles of public television (general interest, political independence/pluralism, free access to content, encouraging democratic values, cultural diversity, etc.) have come up against the more ferocious laws of the commercial market and the fight for audience.

“Culture of regulated co-existence”

Enrique Bustamante (page 21), professor of audiovisual communication and advertising at the University Complutense de Madrid, gave the inaugural speech, providing a general context. In his contribution, he analyses the strong and weak points of the European models of public television, as well as the importance acquired by the definition and development of public service in the digital era. According to the author, who considers university to be the only neutral place for analysis, the new audiovisual panorama that has been gradually making its way since the nineties involves three key elements that help to harmonise the function of public service:

1. The recognition of the need for an influential public service that covers the social, cultural and political demands of democratic societies on the part of the Council of Europe, of the Parliament and of the Commission of the European Union (EU).
 2. The consensus that private broadcasting must also be guided by principles of general interest, given the influence it exercises on all the orders of social life.
 3. The creation of audiovisual authorities independent from the political power, in organisational and financial terms, granted powers of regulation and sanction, completed almost unanimously throughout the EU.
- (pages 22 and 23)

In this respect, Bustamante introduces the concept of a “culture of regulated co-existence” (page 33) and points out the moment of transition experienced in Spain towards a new regulatory framework. He sees the future state audiovisual council as the perfect area to construct this regulated co-existence, based on international or more local experiences, such as the Audiovisual Council of Catalonia (CAC).

Finally, the author concludes that European public television must take on a "threefold challenge" (page 34): political control, financing and public service content.

Financing, programming, pluralism

The rest of the talks are of a highly diverse nature. They range from the theoretical approach of the lecturer at Navarre University, Mercedes Medina (page 41), analysing the funding problems of European public channels, using numerous examples and proposing some solutions, in an ordered didactic way and illustrated with tables; to the conciseness of Vicent Porter (page 35) who, from the *Voice of the Listener & Viewer*¹ explains the modernisation process of public television in the United Kingdom, and especially Christian Blankenburg (page 65), who sets out the seven keys to success in the public sector, taking the German ARD as an example, as sub-director of the Department of International Relations for the channel.

With regard to programming, the talk by Bienvenido León (page 75) (Navarre University) is interesting, who considers this a differential between public and private television and legitimisation for public broadcasting's position in the market. The author's key concept is "adaptation" (page 75), explained using an analogy with the survival of living beings, reminiscent of Darwinian theory: given the rise in ferocious competition, public television must adapt to the new environment so as not to die out, as happened with the dinosaurs. León warns that the growing commercialisation of programmes, financial difficulties and changes produced by digitalisation could end up relegating public television to a marginal role, so that it is vital to maintain a strong public sector. Pablo Carrasco García (page 71) is much more practical, directly establishing parameters to define quality in programming terms, which can be summed up as:

1. technical level,
2. capacity to catch the public's attention,
3. quality of enriching and/or provide the audience with positive elements, and
4. how far reality is reflected.

¹ Independent organisation that represents the interests of consumers of British broadcasting and works for quality and diversity, especially in the public sector.

In spite of this, all the examples used to illustrate the talk by Carrasco García, head of programming and content at TVE, are from TVE itself.

Finally, grouped into the area of pluralism, political independence or citizenship, and in spite of different perspectives, there are talks by Teresa Sádaba (page 89), Christina Holtz-Bacha (page 101), Mario García de Castro (page 111) and François Heinderyckx (page 83). Sádaba focuses on pluralism in news on European public television and shows the need for it to be distanced from the battle for audience and proposes other indicators to measure pluralism, such as the representation of social or political groups, the nature of the intervention or the characteristics of the image. Holtz-Bacha studies the particular relationship between politicians and the public audiovisual system, where concepts come into play such as power, mutual interests and influences (the political system needs the media and vice versa) and where the author uses a concept from the field of biology, "symbiosis" (page 102), to describe this relationship. García de Castro speaks about independence, paying particular attention to the reform process of RTVE, while Heinderyckx relates ICTs, politics and citizenship.

The cultural identity on public television

Apart from the speakers, as there were almost 50 communications presented at the congress and these go to make up a large part of the book (pages 123-828), it's impossible to comment on all of them. From the block dedicated to cultural identity, representation and citizen involvement, the contributions by Enric Castelló and Luisa Martínez García stand out due to their closeness in geographical and thematic terms.

The text by Castelló, "Fictional television series and national identity: a decade of the public Catalan channel" (page 505), presents the results from his doctoral thesis, whose objective is to see how cultural identity is constructed on TVC by analysing 26 Catalan fictional series, broadcast from 1994 to 2003, from *Poblenou* to *Temps de silenci*,

including *Estació d'enllaç*, *Nissaga de poder*, *El cor de la ciutat* and *La memòria dels cargols*, among others. During this period, the author states that TVC applied a policy of in-house production, attempting to promote Catalan culture and language. *La construcció de la identitat nacional en la ficció televisiva* (The construction of national identity in television fiction) is a process present not only in those channels that depend on nations or regions without a state but also in large public and even private corporations.

In the case of TVC, Castelló detects four mechanisms to produce cultural identity in fiction:

1. the territory, where a certain Barcelona centralism is detected,
2. language as an instrument both of normalisation and standardisation,
3. social issues and
4. other historical and political representations.

To end, the author concludes that identity is constructed by contrasting the view we have of our culture with that of others, with the Spanish culture and also with immigration (page 519).

In this respect, the lecturer from the UAB, Luisa Martínez García, also talks about "us" and "them" but her approach is aimed more at presenting "autonomous television as a cultural mediator" (page 493), taking TVC as a reference. In this complete and documented communication, Martínez García reviews how autonomous television channels arose in Spain, argues the need to sanction the idea of public service based on studies already carried out and to look further into the concept of cultural mediation applied to autonomous television.

Public television and the shift to TDT

At a time when expectations are centred on digitalisation and the analogical switch-off or switch-over, TDT is tackled across the board in almost all the blocks but there is one dedicated to it particularly, including eight communications that revolve around the same core issue: terrestrial digital

television in the public broadcasting system (page 727-828).

The approaches of the communications that go to make up the bloc studying public television and the promotion of TDT are quite diverse, even opposed in some cases. For example, there is the hopeful view of Roberto Suárez Candel (page 755), from the Pompeu Fabra University and the pessimism and uncertainty of Francisco Javier Davara (Francisco de Vitoria University) and Juan Fernández Tamames (Business Institute) (page 743). Suárez Candel identifies the transformations involved in digitalisation for television and highlights the implications created by the migration to TDT for public service. He extensively and thoroughly reviews the panorama at the level of Spain and Catalonia and concludes that "the situation of terrestrial digital television in Catalonia is encouraging" (page 770). In addition to the autonomous administration being involved, public television is also developing content and applications that will give citizens reasons to make the switch to TDT.

On the other hand, Davara and Fernández Tamames outline a confusing situation that is approaching catastrophe. The authors, who declare themselves to be misled by "the lack of a clear and coherent policy that orders the television market" (page 743), believe that, due to the importance public television will continue to have, and without a veritable review of the current model, the orientations of the *Expert Committee*² (especially those regarding financing and the obligations of public service) are not coherent with the need to redefine the television system demanded by many of those involved, and auger a disorganised future, as the opportunity to develop a good TDT model "is slipping away". Given the financial problems of RTVE, they propose "the creation of a consortium with a plurality of actors under equal conditions of participation" (page 753), taking the British platform SwitchCo as an example.

The digital conversion of autonomous television channels is studied by Isabel Sarabia (page 773), from the San Antonio de Murcia Catholic University, warning that, if public autonomous TDT does not develop innovative content and additional services, it will be unlikely to catch the attention of users. The contributions by Tatiana Millán

2 *Informe para la reforma de los medios de comunicación de titularidad del Estado*, Madrid, 2005.

and Soledad Ruano (page 791) are also interesting as, being from the University of Extremadura, they focus on the influence of TDT on public television programming. They see TDT as a challenge to improve pluralism and the quality content of public broadcasting. And, finally, the communications by Marina Ramos Serrano (page 801), from Seville University and by Raquel Urquiza García (page 815), from CES Villanueva (Complutense de Madrid University) close this block, the former investigating the aspect of interactivity and the latter studying the role of TDT as a public service within the European market, noting the trends of the main countries.

Children and young audiences: concerns about trash television

Another block of the book deals with the "children and young television audiences: regulating content and protecting the audience" (page 625-725). Of note is the fact that, of the eight communications that go to make up the block, there are four that revolve around the same core issue: trash television. With this premise, the lecturer from Vigo University, Alberto Dafonte (page 637) looks at the concept of trash television, relating it with audiences and with the use of television by children. Along the same lines but with a more methodological stance (based on a process of bibliographical documentation and empirical verification with reality shows), Sergi Cortiñas Rovira (page 651), from the Pompeu Fabra University, provides an overall review of trash television in Spain and notes some new elements with regard to the relevant regulations. But what is most innovative in Cortiñas's text is that he investigates the harmful effects of trash television on children (page 654).

On the other hand, Carmen Marta Lazo (San Jorge University, Zaragoza) (page 663) confronts trash television and quality television, explaining that, given this way of producing television and the small amount of children's programming, public television (and also private) must be committed to a very important sector in society that is not always taken into account, namely children. And in order to stress what public television should be (separated from the battles for audience and governed by its founding principles), María Teresa Mercado Sáez (Cardenal Herrera Uni-

versity) (page 677) explains (and criticises) how Valencian public television kept a celebrity gossip programme on its screens for seven years, *Tómbola*, which it exported to other public autonomous channels, with a format more be-fitting private channels.

Of challenges and expectations

When we read the title of this book, we think about the future. "Challenge" sounds like looking ahead, seeing what will need to be taken into account in order to face up to changes and transformations. And it perfectly fits the situation we are experiencing in the audiovisual sector. This idea of future is covered in most talks and communications but, nonetheless, not in all. For example, although this does not make it any less interesting, in a book whose title talks about challenges, perhaps themes such as fiction during TVE's monopoly do not have a place or, to give another example, the historical series of the eighties, or news coverage of the NATO referendum.

On the other hand, in a book that brings together everything dealt with at the congress, the origins of the speakers/communicators (both in professional and geographical terms, alternating texts in Spanish and in English) are diverse, and the result is therefore also different. This should not present any problem and, moreover, it enriches, providing visions from many perspectives. But in this book the variety of origins leads to a certain imbalance in the extension of the texts already noted and especially in the styles and explanations of different subjects, leading to notable differences between directors of public bodies and academics, between pragmatism and theory, between specificity and generality.

In spite of this, *Los desafíos de la televisión pública en Europa* is, without doubt, an essential book for the libraries of academics and professionals from the sector, a frame of reference for public television in Europe (focused particularly on the situation in Spain) that, like all good studies, resolves some questions and raises others.