# Regional Media Convergence: Looking at Television in Europe

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## Abstract

*This paper connects the issue of media content and formats to the increasing debate on convergence or divergence within Europe. Accepting the fact that media does not only reflect but also shape reality, this paper looks at the role of the media as part of the construction of public space and as a potential driver towards convergence or divergence. This leads to two observations: firstly, the media industry in Europe is still a local business with only a small convergence in content and formats; secondly, as regards respective local national audiences, the media industry does not support convergence. However, there is the counterintuitive conclusion that a low degree of media convergence in Europe might be good for Europe.*

## Keywords:

# 1. Introduction

February 22, 2013: In his speech on the future of Europe, Joachim Gauck (2013), the President of the Federal Republic of Germany, called for a Europe-wide TV programme. In his opinion the programme should be more than just music, so that it covers the whole of Europe from entrepreneurial youth in Poland, and unemployed in Spain, to the family support systems in Denmark.

Currently, in Europe, we basically have Eurosport and MTV as "European" TV stations. In addition to this, there is ARTE, a German-French-Cooperation, and 3sat, a German-speaking network bringing together three channels from Austria, Germany and Switzerland.

Regardless of all technical, organisational, economical and other aspects of his suggestions, there is one striking question: after many decades of European integration with the same currency in people's pockets and the same licence-plates on their cars, with standards for almost everything, from bananas to "Bologna" (the European system of higher education), and (almost) the same passports, why do we need politicians to ask for this programme? Why do we not just have an equivalent of American NBC? Why did that not "just happen"?

These observations lead to several questions: (1) What exactly is "Regional Media Convergence"? (2) Do we have empirical evidence about Regional Media Convergence? (3) Which theoretical concepts are behind Regional Media Convergence?

All this is based on an important duality. On the one hand, media is a product of culture. On the other hand, media shapes culture. We therefore have to look at the development of Europe and its consequences with respect to convergence and divergence as well as at the development and role of media with respect to its convergence and divergence.

To avoid misunderstanding, even though this paper deals with "convergence", it does not deal with media convergence in the sense of (a) combination of technologies and platforms, (b) integration of services and markets, (c) technical convergence, or (d) consolidation of companies through alliances and mergers, as phrased by Chon et al. (2003, 142).

What we will discuss is convergence of contents or formats. Therefore, the question concerns whether TV programmes can become similar in a specific region and eventually move towards one joint TV-station covering Europe as a whole.

## 2. Political Convergence in Europe

Machill, Beiler and Fischer (2006, 60-61) highlight that when we talk about Europe, we talk about a construct that is constantly diversified by including new member states. In 1993, 12 member states constituted the European Union; this number rose in 2007 to 27. This means the European Union has more than doubled its size in less than twenty years.

Policy has sought to promote integration processes in Europe; since 1952, all Europeans have a common parliament located in Strasbourg. During the first years the parliament had a controlling function, but since then its powers have been constantly broadened. The first milestone was the Treaty of Roma in 1957, basically the founding declaration of the European Community. Then, in 1992, the Treaty of Maastricht included a common foreign and security policy as well as cooperation in cases of justice and domestic policy. The last important event was the Treaty of Lisbon in 2007 that allowed the 27 member states of the European Union to move closer together. For example, since the Treaty of Lisbon the European Union has had some kind of common Foreign Minister, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. In addition, the European Union has had a common currency since the Treaty of Maastricht – the Euro – that is the official currency in 17 member states.

However, the past has shown that the European Union is far from developing a common foreign policy. For example, the Second Iraq War in 2003 divided the European Union: one half of Europe was willing to follow the US line, even without UN resolution, some countries remained neutral and other countries like Austria, Germany and France refused to enter a war without UN resolution.

Moving on to the issue of convergence, there are many studies dealing with the changes within Europe. For instance, Due, Madsen and Jensen (1991, 99) found clear evidence of convergence in terms of European industrial relations. At that time, the authors could only anticipate the creation and, therefore, the future importance of the European Commission and the European Parliament. However, in their conclusions, they assigned great importance to international as well as supranational institutions in the future.

Georgiadis (2008) comes to a similar conclusion placing the eastward enlargement of the European Union into the convergence-divergence-debate. He mentions the convergence hype of the 1990s and then develops the thesis that the European transformation acts as a mechanism for European convergence.

These and many other papers assume that when borders are reduced and interaction between the inhabitants of different countries increases, then the differences will disappear and similarities will build up. Therefore, it is a logical consequence to look at the media in Europe to investigate whether there can also be discovered drifts towards convergence.

## 3. MEDIA CONVERGENCE IN EUROPE: THE CASE OF TELEVISION

In the media landscape, we find some regulations by Brussels and, on the other hand, a high degree of interpretation of EU guidelines by the member states. While there has existed a directive for audio-visual media in Brussels since 2007, its interpretation has highly diverged as Scheuer (2008) shows with regard to the example of laws for the protection of youth in Europe. Although these laws are all based on the same directive, it is not certain that a directive which fulfils the requirements of one European country also fulfils those of a neighbouring country (Scheuer 2008, 11). This fact confirms the cultural identity of each country, but it does not simplify the implementation of a pan-European media.

## 3.1 Sky Channel and its failure

In April 1982, the European Superstation, the first pan-European satellite broadcaster, was started. The vision of the founders of the European Superstation (renamed Sky Channel) was to deliver one programme to all European countries, which led to several problems. As English is the lingua franca of Europe, the programmes of Sky Channel were broadcasted in English. Thus, the makers tended to adopt series from television in Great Britain. But they underestimated the power of language and culture. Viewers often were not able to understand the language and British movies, for example, contained too much violence for the taste of many European viewers at that time (Collins 1989, 364-365). As there was a misfit of language and culture regarding programming, there was also a misfit regarding advertising. Because of Europe's diversity not enough companies wanted to advertise in an international market; most instead focused on finding a national market for their products (Collins 1989, 362). In early 1989, Sky Channel closed all its European offices and announced that it would focus solely on the British and Irish market. Altogether, the first attempt to establish a pan-European TV station turned out to be a huge failure.

## 3.2 Eurosport as a multilingual concept

Eurosport started in 1989 as a pan-European sports broadcaster in English, German and Dutch. Today, Eurosport "broadcasts in 54 countries and 20 languages to 130 million homes" (Eurosport 2013). Eurosport broadcasts the same footage to different countries and uses country-dependent voice synchronisation. As this example shows, the strategy of a multilingual TV station seems to be effective, as Eurosport now broadcasts beyond the borders of the European Union. In the case of Eurosport, we find, on the one hand, divergence with respect to language and the employment of national commentators and, on the other hand, convergence with respect to economic power and the full use of sports rights.

## 3.3 MTV as localised business

In 1987, MTV Networks Europe started its broadcast after a hard fight against the music industry and having met legal requirements in certain countries, especially Germany, which was concerned about Americanisation. By including German musicians in the programmes of MTV Europe, they found a way to combine the interests of both parties. In the beginning, MTV Europe privileged the American way of programming, but changed soon to a more local strategy. This localisation was accompanied by the opening of branches in different European countries. As Esser (2002, 20) reports, MTV Europe was forced to change its monolingual strategy because of the success of the local TV stations, and it also started to establish local TV stations in different countries. Today, there are 18 local European MTV channels, which are free to create their own programmes. This also means that the local MTV channels can freely adapt to customer requirements and taste. This is a clear example of divergence, in which a homogeneous product is broken up into individual country-specific products.

## 3.4 ARTE as a niche

ARTE is the only European TV station that is founded on an interstate media treaty between Germany and France. The original idea of ARTE was the promotion of European movie productions through transnational diffusion and the advancement of European Unification through information. However, the process of creating a common culture channel of France and Germany was an awkward undertaking. As Gräßle (1995, 90) notes, the adjustments to German and French interests as well as German and French legal systems were so complicated that it took about 20 month and 10 draft treaties to come to a common solution. In 1995, constituent parts of ARTE's broadcasts were German or French productions, and no joint productions (Gräßle 1995, 95). Gräßle states, "The programme work is to the greatest possible extent bureaucratic and contrasts – combined with little own production […] mainly German and French broadcasts without putting them in relation with each other" (1995, 95). Furthermore, Gräßle

comes to the conclusion that "ARTE has not been established as a European TV station but as a binational collage of German-French programmes, that is dominated by the interests of its partners. The original Euro-political, technological and economic goals have been missed" (1995, 97). Or to phrase it differently: "One glances at another country – but no common product with different creative point of views is being generated" (Plog 2002, 76).

## 3.5 Regional media convergence

Twenty years ago, Europe had 49 TV programmes. Currently, we have over 9.000 (Europäische Audiovisuelle Informationsstelle, 2012). When we look at the cases presented above, in the vast majority, they belong to four categories, in which some kind of regional convergence takes place.

The first category consists of Europe-wide channels. Taking the case of Eurosport, we have the same content, but different languages. However, we do not see any changes, since this station is not expanding within Europe.

The second category is simply adaption of formats. Examples of this are formats such as "Next Superstar", "X-Factor" and "Next Super Model". These studio based shows are absolutely trivial and could easily be synchronised to broadcast in multiple languages in different countries. But obviously each country wants to have its own country specific show with country specific hosts, audiences and candidates. Therefore, we have, for instance, "Next Topmodel" Germany, Austria, Italy, France, Greece, Finland, and so on. We also have a local audience, which can better identify itself with familiar participants. However, here we have at least a trend towards similar formats.

The third category consists of synchronised programmes. German TV, for example, has many broadcasts that are purchased abroad, such as "The Simpsons", "Big Bang Theory" and all the "CSI" variations. Also, in other countries there are many purchased TV shows. De Bens and de Smaele (2001) found that commercial European channels in Europe cover on average 44 percent of their broadcasting time with US content, while public channels include 11.5 percent American programmes. This percentage differs from country to country. When many European countries converge

towards the US, then we have in fact a common media convergence, but we have also to take into consideration Americanisation.

In the last few years, a fourth category became relevant; certain countries have developed an expertise in specific types of productions. Examples are detective stories from Northern Europe, French movies as well as documentaries from Great Britain. However, this is just starting, and it is a difficult start, since British series such as "Doctor Who" have not yet made it to the European market.

In all of these four categories, to some degree, a regional convergence has taken place. On the other hand, we see the opposite development. For instance, MTV has taken moves towards local adaptations, which is equivalent to divergence. This means that even products tailored for Europe as a whole, discontinue convergence and start to diverge.

Even if this is just a vague first look at a complex issue, it is surprising that we see hardly any real movements towards joint European programming. Taking into account the possibility of having multilingual programmes and considering the huge cost savings, it is really surprising this model is not really pursued. A well educated guess is that 90% of the TV programmes are national, 9% local and less than 1% European.


# 4. Explanations


## 4.1 Psychological: Minimal Group Paradigm for Europe

Collective identity has been at the centre of every society that has been formed. For some time, collective identity has been an issue with regard to Europe, where public debate is increasingly concerned with the problem of a European identity (e.g., Pinxten, Cornelis, and Rubenstein 2007; Caporaso and Min-hyung 2009). A group has an identity if it succeeds in defining itself compared with other groups by attributing meaning to itself that is stable over time. It also contributes to motivation and to implicit coordination. However, one question remains: At which level

should the building of identity take place in order to make use of its positive effects?

Tajfel et al. (1971, 151) brought the idea of the minimal group paradigm to the fore of European social psychology. The studies of the minimal group paradigm were meant to explicate the "base-line conditions" for intergroup discrimination. One result is that the differentiation between groups consists of favouring the in-group over the out-group. These studies have shown that the strategy of maximal differentiation in favour of the in-group is preferred.

In terms of Europe, there are basically two options: either level of identity building is "Europe", leaving us with a European identity. We all feel ourselves to be Europeans and we act according to this guiding belief. Accordingly, we have the in-group of European inhabitants and the out-group of the rest of the world. In this case, we need a process of convergence, since such power can only be generated if everybody accepts that "large and extensive" identity. Alternatively, the level of identity building is on the country level. In this case, we feel ourselves to be German, Austrian, Finnish, or Greek. The in-group, therefore, is our home country and the out-group is the rest of the world. Europe does not play an influential part in this setting. Here, the identity is the smaller unit. The inhabitants do not feel a cultural distance from other members of the in-group, as a result of having the same language and rituals, similar looks and values, as well as basic assumptions. Identity building on the national level seems to be easier for many people compared with building a European identity.

To relate this paradigm to the regional media convergence, we have to look at both options. On the European level, we see Eurosport as the only case of a European media channel, which represents European identity. Here, we have a coalition of independent media channels serving a niche market, but for the whole of Europe. On the home country level, we find most of the other cases. Even if they had started with a vision to serve one European market, they changed to serve the local requirements of their audience. This preferred strategy focusing on the country level, and explainable by the minimal group paradigm, extends even to formats such as the already mentioned "Next Superstar", "X-Factor" and "Next Super Model".

In summary, the minimal group paradigm offers a convincing explanation why we do not have European television, since we see clearly

that Europeans feel European, but firstly feel as members of their national context. The minimal group paradigm even explains why the small amount of convergence came to a stop: with the number of countries increasing, it became harder to feel European. It was already complicated when Europe was made up of countries such as the Benelux, France, Germany and Austria. However, now that its borders reach almost to Turkey, the basis for the minimal group becomes quite large.

**4.2 CULTURAL: LOOKING AT THE THREE LEVELS OF CULTURE**

Returning to the traditional model of Schein (1985), we see that culture is represented on the levels of artefacts, values and assumptions. Applying this model to Europe as a whole, we note activities on all three levels. (1) There are obvious artefacts, which were created to develop a European Identity. Examples include the European flag as well as the European currency, the EURO. There are administrational and political institutions that represent Europe, on the one hand, in their dealings with external negotiating partners, and on the other hand, the members of this culture, the people of the countries involved. (2) On the level of values and assumptions, reality looks different: only 22 percent of Europeans agree entirely that they feel they are nationals of Europe (Europäische Kommission 2013, 22). They know some European values, but not because they feel them but because they watch them in the media, on TV, and in the news. (3) With the increase of the size of Europe, there has been an increase in discussions about the level below the values, which is the level of basic assumptions: if due to identified differences between the countries Europeans do not feel European, they cannot have many common basic assumptions.

As a next step, we can look at media and the media industry. (1) Here, we find some European artefacts that can be identified in the media. One obvious example is the use of the word Europe in a slogan or even in the company name. A local radio station in Saarland, for example, uses the slogan "SR1 Europawelle Saar," which translates into "European Wave". Curiously, the programme of this radio station does not have any European content, neither in terms of language, nor in news, nor in music played.

Nevertheless, by using the word European in its slogan, this symbolises that the station is part of Europe. Other examples were already cited above, such as MTV, which started with a European TV station called MTV Europe. Also, Eurosport internalises Europe by using its name as part of the channel's name as well as using the symbol of the European flag in its logo. However, there is hardly any connection to be seen between media and (2) values as well as (3) assumptions. It seems as if the media companies do not see enough customers with the assumed European attitude and interest. This strategy of the media companies shows us that the common assumptions are not sufficient for doing business in Europe. This picture is confirmed when we look at the culture corridor (Scholz 1991) of Europe: we see just a few common artefacts but hardly any shared values and basic assumptions. This explains why not many see a need for a European media convergence and even less a possibility to do so.

### 4.3 Sociological: The concept of Public Space

Following the classification of Machill, Beiler and Fischer (2006, 61), we have to discriminate between a pan-European public sphere that is "independent of national states" (2006, 61) and a European public sphere that "emerges as a result of the Europeanization of the national public spheres" (2006, 61).

Trenz (2004) has investigated the media coverage on European governance in national quality newspapers. He analysed a sample of 11 quality newspapers from European countries: European articles that discuss "European topics as dominant issues", Europeanised articles that "discuss national topics as dominant issues with reference to one or several European sub issues" and articles with a European referential frame that "discuss non-European issues but make different rhetorical references to Europe" (Trenz 2004, 296). He comes to the conclusion that this "process of selecting and presenting European news does not necessarily lead to convergence of the national media agendas and debates, but, at least, assures a minimum degree of information about the EU policy process and constitutes a background reality framing a political world that is known and shared among Europeans. European Public Sphere does exist" (Trenz 2004, 296).

But what about television? Contrary to quality newspapers, there is usually less space for the promotion of the joint European process. Since television has basically to rely on pictures, there are only two types of pictures: people on the street being unhappy about Europe and politicians spending their time in emergency meetings. All this created some public space, but one where the term "Europe" received definitely a negative connotation. In addition, some TV stations basically considered themselves a "voice of the country" – even against Europe.

# 5. Conclusion

Of course, this research is just a small contribution to the complex issue of "regional media convergence". We need more conceptual thinking and more empirical research related to Europe, but also to other regions such as Asia and Latin America, for better understanding of regional media trends.

Keeping this in mind, we arrived at one interesting finding: with some minor exceptions (such as Eurosport, MTV, ARTE and locally adapted formats), there is hardly any convergence of media content or media formats within Europe. And there are enough plausible explanations for this finding.

Since media always reflects some degree of culture, this leads to the conclusion that Europe does not only reject such a media convergence, but might also reject total convergence in other fields. Looking at the current crisis in Europe, where national interests play an important role, this is not really surprising.

However, Europe is and will continue to be a public space. This holds true also for the media, which supports it. However, media basically consists of loosely coupled systems, which act in a federalist way: they deal with Europe, but definitely from a local perspective.

When we examine, in addition, the European media landscape, we find separate countries with their own media production excellence. However, instead of an intensive European exchange, we find individual niches that are more or less separated from one another.

Not to converge might not to be a bad idea: for many Europeans, we have more than enough central tendencies in Europe. Therefore, for them it could be a good idea for the media not to converge in Europe. For media companies and their competitive strategies this clearly calls for independent actors in a polycentric structure. And for Joachim Gauck, it could mean that a central European TV station is not a very good idea at all.

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