

Public Versus Private  
Broadcasting in Europe:  
False Issues, Real Challenges

by Mario Hirsch

Do not quote without the permission of the author.  
©1984 Columbia Institute for Tele-Information

Columbia Institute for Tele-Information  
Graduate School of Business  
Columbia University  
809 Uris Hall  
New York, NY 10027  
(212)854-4222

PUBLIC VERSUS PRIVATE BROADCASTING

IN EUROPE:

FALSE ISSUES, REAL CHALLENGES

Mario Hirsch

Director of Public and Governmental Relations  
Coronet Planning  
Luxembourg

December 1984

This paper was presented to the Research Program in Telecommunications Seminar, "Public Versus Private Broadcasting in Europe."

Research Working Paper series. Not for citation, quotation, reproduction, or distribution without written permission. All papers represent the author's view and not necessarily that of the Research Program or its affiliates."



## Introduction

Even though the issue of public versus private broadcasting dominates the debate on communications policy in most European countries, it is not really the issue one should look at, if one wants to understand what will happen in the years to come as far as the shaping of Europe's broadcasting landscape is concerned. The real problems facing Europe's broadcasting future have much more to do with program contents, their quality, the extension of the potential content and coverage and last, but not least the economics on which the slowly emerging structures are supposed to rely.

The European governments are in a quandary. Whose blueprint on satellite or cable control should they adopt, if any? There is none in Europe that will cater for the imminent expansion of satellite and cable broadcasting and the United States cannot provide one that would be applicable. The United States does not have to ensure that diverse languages and cultures in its member states have to be protected as is the current desire in Europe. It is of course axiomatic that the new cable and satellite media can only succeed if given more freedom. They must be allowed, among other things, to exploit European not just national audiences.

Governments however are not yet prepared to relax their control and to open up to the new realities for reasons that have to do with the eminently political nature of broadcasting and the fear that once gates are opened there will be an undesired influx of programs originated in the United States. As a rule, governments want to stick to public broadcasting monopolies as long as can be done for the simple reason that this structure serves them well for propaganda purposes. The main advantage of public broadcasting organizations in the eyes of politicians on the Continent is that it ensures them almost unrestricted access and optimal exposure, quite independent from whether or not they have something significant to convey to the public. You don't give up an excellent

power instrument of this kind unless you are forced to.

The exorbitant costs of broadcasting and the increasing reluctance of the public in general to pay licence fees for what is after all a very limited choice of in average three TV programs in most European countries have fuelled considerably the debate on whether or not privatization should be allowed.

The end of media nationalism in Europe that is claimed in some interested quarters might actually be tantamount to the breaking up of the existing broadcasting monopolies. We are quite definitely experiencing the end of one era and the beginning of another, even though it is far from clear what will eventually emerge. Broadcasting in Europe has grown up as an essentially national, not to say nationalist, instrument. Bolstered by the argument based on the scarcity of air-space European governments have built up systems effectively under national control and designed to serve national interests. It must be added however that the growth of broadcasting on a national basis has rested not only on nationalist particularism. The linguistic diversity in Europe has possibly been a most important element in the creation of tightly defined national broadcasting areas, and continues to be so.

The threat to national monopolies comes not only from transnational developments and from private operators who want to take advantage of economies of scale. Inside the nation-states, monopolies are increasingly questioned in Europe by what one might call a spirit of community revival. Today, the so-called free radios are the expression of this. Tomorrow it will be the turn of free television stations, as one can already see in France, even though authorities are not prepared as yet to go for it, in order not to endanger their ambitious cable and satellite policies. The assumption that radio might become redundant as television has expanded is being proved wrong. Not only are national and international services expanding, but there is also a powerful surge of develop-

ment at the local level. Local radio stations, under formal and informal (piracy) auspices, are springing up in local communities all over Europe.

These developments on the transnational and on the local front will inevitably move all forms of media communications from the carefully regulated and restricted national systems that still prevail in Europe against all odds into an entirely new context in which national boundaries and national regulations become irrelevant. At the same time the multiplicity of media outlets is removing the time-honoured argument for public control; i.e., the need to regulate access to the limited air-space available to each country in the "public interest" of that country. Regulatory authorities find themselves outflanked by the new challenges and vacillate between attempts to retain traditional levels of control and resignation to the abandonment of all attempts to safeguard the "public interest."

Instead of concentrating on the obsolete question of public control, as do most policy-makers, it would be much more rewarding to deal with the new challenges and to ensure the supply of sufficient programs to satisfy all the additional channels, the quality and content of the programs and the cost to the public of installing the means of using the new technologies. It is obvious that these challenges pose enormous opportunities as well as problems.

But unfortunately the debate focuses primarily on the question of gate-keeping. The real question should be however: Will there be any gates to keep, either in terms of technical access, or of political, or economic or moral standards? But even if there are gates, control of access to the use of satellites and cable may well fall into the hands of private gate-keepers. Under this assumption, the only conceivable function of public gate-keepers is to make sure that minimal standards are respected because if unregulated, private gate-keepers may wield

vast and undesirable powers of censorship on favoured-customer terms, of propaganda and pornography, as well as the abuse of rights such as royalties and advertising revenue. But public gate-keeping should be used by no means to slow down the evolution, be it only because Europe is in bad need of new outlets for programming and advertisement.

#### Breaking the Broadcasting Monopoly

The difficulties public broadcasting in Europe finds in understanding itself under market-place conditions are intrinsic ones. The very notion of public service broadcasting has been defined and developed under non-market-place conditions. On the one hand there has been the scarcity of frequencies available and the excessive cost of production and distribution equipment; on the other hand the "right" of a maximum audience to obtain a maximum satisfaction of all needs, that are deemed respectable, and the right of all groups of society to express themselves. The most elaborate definition of the philosophy of public broadcasting has been given in the jurisprudence of the German Federal Constitutional Court, <sup>and</sup> exemplified in the concept of internal pluralism (Binnenpluralismus).

The gearing of these "rights" to the prevailing scarcity yielded the program mix which characterises up to today public broadcasting. Since the assumptions on which this concept relies do not exist any longer, the question arises as to what will happen to this self-perception of public TV in a market-place abounding both in production and in distribution facilities. The internal pluralism would seem to become pointless with the external pluralism of the market-place taking shape. The logic of a mix of programs doesn't seem to make sense anymore in a landscape which in itself represents in aggregation that very mix by gathering through specialised services to all conceivable tastes.

Hans Kimmel, International Affairs Controller of ZDF, has described in a striking simile the mood of public broadcasters: "Public broadcasters in Europe still are inclined to believe that broadcasting is an electronic decathlon in Olympic games where only one gold medal is awarded. In the meantime, however, specialists are evolving for special events - hurdles, javelin, shot-put - and each of them may outdo the decathlete in his special discipline. Public broadcasters will have to decide on which competitions they have to concentrate in order to survive in the future Olympics." I)

Although most European governments are responding to the challenge of cable and satellite by diversifying their broadcasting structure, reactions in continental Europe differ from the UK for two important reasons. One is greater hostility to advertising, amounting in certain countries to a total ban so far on TV commercials; the other is greater hostility to US-originated programming. There is a third factor that explains these differing approaches. Continental countries usually put a greater emphasis than the UK on public authorities, notably the state-owned PTT, to initiate, control and finance new forms of teledistribution. Few European countries are following the route of the UK towards substantial deregulation of communications; therefore they are seeking to reconcile greater choice for the TV consumer with continuing state control of the technical means. The trends that are likely to recast the traditional pattern of European broadcasting can be summed up as follows, according to Rex Winsbury, editor of "New Media Markets": substantial de-regulation of television broadcasting; further dilution, tantamount in due course to abandonment of the concept of public service broadcasting; a shift towards subscription-based TV services, as opposed to advertising-based or tax-based services; diversification of the sources and distributors of programs; diversification of the owner-

---

I) "Europe is an oviparous woollen dairy sow", Intermedia, November 1983, volume II/no.6



ship of the means of distribution; convergence of entertainment TV and business information over the same networks; internationalisation of television,<sup>1)</sup>

"Breaking the broadcasting monopoly" is a frequently recurring issue in European media policy making. At a certain level of abstraction, one can speak about a basic European broadcasting model. It has some strong monopolistic features. For instance, there is generally a large public sector and the private part is strictly regulated - if it exists at all. The number of legal broadcasting institutions is usually quite small (hence an increasing tendency to piracy). Especially for television the number of channels is very low - two to four. In general there are some programming obligations inflicted upon broadcasters. The basic method of finance is the licence fee and advertisements are strictly limited and regulated.

The explanation for this situation is that broadcasting has been considered as an application of communications technology and the monopoly was seen as the natural way to exploit limited resources, that is frequencies. Even though it is argued now persuasively in most European countries that the notion of a broadcasting monopoly is an anachronism, made obsolete by the discovery of more resources and new methods to exploit them, one should nevertheless remember the origins of the notion, which might help to understand the stubbornness that leads some people to defend the concept of monopoly. Frequencies have been considered for a long time as a limited resource that needed national as well as international regulation. The regulatory aspect calls for state intervention. The shortage aspect calls for monopolistic solutions.

It should be pointed out however that the national broadcasting systems you find in Europe represent each of them taken per se

---

1) "Into the era of 2001", Financial Times, 15.12.83.

different ways of adapting to a basically monopolistic model.

A closer examination reveals as a matter of fact that the similarities are overshadowed by the differences. Some examples will indicate how relevant a differentiated approach is: The NRK monopoly in Norway is organized as a directorate on ministerial level, while the government of Luxembourg has granted monopoly rights to a profit-seeking private company, CPT/RTL, controlled by French and Belgian capital. In Sweden, the monopoly is given to a private joint-stock enterprise, which in turn is divided into four independent production companies, but they all run on a non-profit base. In Finland there is some kind of symbiosis between the public YLE and the commercial MTV, the latter renting air-time on YLE's channels. In the Netherlands you find the "pillarised" model of the NOS and in the UK the duopoly BBC-IBA. In Germany, the "Länder"-model of public broadcasting calls for an extreme decentralization.

In all the countries there is a "monopolistic" legal regulation of access - even in Italy, where RAI holds the monopoly for nation-wide broadcasting. The issue of breaking the monopoly therefore seems relevant everywhere, but the meaning cannot possibly be the same in all countries. There are different kinds of monopoly to break and different solutions sought for. In defence of the monopolistic model you find everywhere in Europe the idea that broadcasting should be a public service, not an object for economic exploitation on commercial grounds. But this should not lead us to fall into a "normative trap", that would consider public service now threatened by commercialism. If we look closely at the actors who question the existing monopolies in different countries, we will probably find a whole range of motives and one of them is most of the time a quite understandable dissatisfaction with the way traditional monopolies have administered resources given to them.

It is also abundantly clear to almost everybody familiar with the issues that cable and satellite represent a joint attack on, and potential substitute for, the TV status quo. It has been argued, of course, in the UK for instance, that cable may take away only 10-15 per cent of the BBC/ITV audience. This misses however the point because such a migration to cable or to individual reception from satellites could in itself have dramatic effects on ITV revenues, based as they are on audience related advertising, especially given ITV's high fixed costs. It would also weaken still further the BBC's, or for that matter any other public broadcaster's case to remain a call upon the taxpayers' purse.

#### The Issue of Commercialism

Private broadcasting is usually identified in Europe with commercialism. Arising in part from considerations of cultural policy, and certainly provoked by efforts to develop new means of communication for reasons of industrial policy, is a set of concerns which are conveniently referred to by the term "commercialism". This process is what cultural policy seeks to resist, although it is more often a means to achieving economic/industrial ends than an end pursued for its own sake. The negative connotations attached to private exploitation of broadcasting find their origin also in the fact that the main available model of commercialism, that prevailing in the US, is not viewed with much favour by most European elites.

For the most part, these pejorative associations stem either from an idealist view of culture (it is only quite recently that European ministries of culture think of their field as being dominated by "cultural industries"; this approach was suggested by the Council of Europe ) and communication as spiritual goods which should not be

sullied by the market place or traded for profit, or from a political objection to capitalism and the power of a business class, which might be reinforced by mass media. Political opposition to commercialism can range from a fully worked-out marxist position <sup>1)</sup>, according to which the means of opinion-and-consciousness-formation should not be allowed to fall into the hands of a powerful business class, to a view that pluralistic democracy requires guarantees of access to groups and interests which cannot afford to buy communication channels and that the general public interest requires some limit to commercial exploitation of media and therefore a public sector approach (the latter view is represented by the German social democratic party SPD).

According to its critics, commercialism is the production and supply of information and culture within a market structure, for profit. This is held to have a number of varied, mainly negative consequences. Firstly, it is supposed to advance concentration of ownership and control into private hands. Secondly, the producer is held to have no necessary concern for the intrinsic value of what is supplied and no responsibility for wider moral, social or political consequences. At best the commercial exploiter is thought to be neutral on such matters and at worst, he is supposed to influence production in favour of class interests and conservative forces. Thirdly, there is a prevalent view that, in the market for culture and information, Gresham's Law prevails and the bad drives out the good, because the largest demand is likely to be for what is cheapest to produce and most superficial in its appeal.

In general, commercialism is often equated with conscienceless encouragement of popular prejudice and the wish for easy, immediate gratification or worse (pornography, vicarious violence etc.).

---

1) The most influential author in that respect is the Belgian Armand Mattelart. Cf. his "Télévision: enjeux sans frontières", Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, Grenoble 1980.

As Denis McQuail (Amsterdam University), one of the best students of European mass media, noted, this litany of evils does tend to obscure the fact that there are positive things to be said on behalf of the market. These positive things have mainly to do with freedom and diversity of opportunity for cultural producer and receiver.<sup>1)</sup>

Commercialism appears in Europe under several forms. If one excepts RTL (Luxembourg) and Rupert Murdoch's "Sky Channel", there is little outspoken commercialism, run as a business and without any specific form of public regulation of content for the time being in Europe. A much weaker model of commercialism is however much more frequent. It is provided by a privately financed operation run within a structure of public regulation as part of a wider system. Examples are the ITV companies in the UK and MTV in Finland. Subscription television offered on cable networks represents a third category, but here it should be noted that European Pay TV-companies operate on a franchise base that imposes quite restrictive conditions on content. The last case is the most interesting one and it comes closest to the most frequent form of weak commercialisation in Europe. It refers to the "dilution" of cultural and informational content by public service broadcasters in the interests of maximising audiences or saving money, as a result of competition of different kinds or because of economic and political pressure. The competitive situation in Belgium between RTL and the public RTB-F or the situation in Italy, where RAI is under considerable pressure from the private networks, illustrate best this case. Such a situation can be very insidious, because it might lead public broadcasters to adopt the smallest common denominator in order to stay in the race.

The issue of commercialism is especially salient in countries where the public service tradition has been strong and where few concessions

---

1) In an unpublished paper for the ECPR workshop on European New Media Policy (1984).

have yet been made to popular or commercial pressure. This applies to the Scandinavian countries and to the Netherlands. Choices about commercial broadcasting have been faced in the past in most European countries, but in much more controlled environments. The situation has changed considerably in so far as there are now more opportunities for commercial provision without permission or accountability and a greater chance for individual consumers to behave as if in a market for information and culture (thanks to cable, VCRs and satellites). Especially crucial is the spectre of foreign commercialism, by way of transborder flow. This aspect, which is so far represented on a large scale by Luxembourg's CLT/RTL, is supposed to hold all the most feared components of commercialism I have mentioned above: weakening of the national culture and influence of the nation state; uncontrolled advertising, loss of revenue and audiences. By comparison, one's own national and supervised commercialism looks quite attractive to most European countries and leads them increasingly to give up their original virginity.

There is also a certain resignation involved in this, because in most European countries the thought is that the communication revolution is coming anyway and the best one can do is to try to tame or channel it, hopefully for some national advantage. The revisionist attitude of the German SPD, which at last has come to peace with the idea of commercial broadcasting, is a good case in point. A pragmatic approach gains ground in most countries. It is based on the wish to profit for the national economic interest from this potential growth sector. The possible benefits include a boost for electronics industries.

The possible consequences to printed media attract a good deal of attention in some countries. The Association of German newspaper publishers has recently based its claim to be a partner in the development of new media such as cable and satellite on a paper by

the economist Eberhard Witte (Munich University) who made the point that the advent of new media does not increase advertising in general but will rather lead to a new distribution of the existing cake. The publishers want to multiply their stakes in this new battle of redistribution of scarce advertising revenues and they want, as a consequence, to join in the development of private television. The battle will be tough because it is being argued convincingly by most experts that there is room for at most two fully commercial services in Germany as is the case in most European countries. But here again, RTL is already well established in the starting blocks. It operates jointly with the German publishing house Bertelsmann the first German-language commercial TV program (RTL plus) since the beginning of the year. This program, which has a limited penetration into the Federal Republic for the time being, is supposed to go on the French DBS TDF-T two years from now.

The commercialisation issue is of widely varying centrality in the different European countries. It is evidently more central in those countries where it is invested with the greatest symbolic significance as a matter of precedent. The foremost cases in this respect are Denmark, Norway and Spain, where decisions about the extension of a very limited television service have to be taken quickly, where a totally non-commercial monopoly prevails and where there is a threat from abroad. The issue has also symbolic significance in Sweden, where the question of imbalance between public and private sectors is ever-present, but where no decision about television is imminent. In Germany, future developments are tied up with the expansion of the private sector and while this exercises the political opponents of commercialisation, further privatisation is more or less a fait accompli. The French situation is influenced primarily by the strategy of Luxembourg's CWF/RTL, a company which is controlled by French public interests (Favas). France and Luxembourg have agreed in principle

October 26, 1984 to jointly operate a television system based on the French DBS TDF-I, pivoted admittedly on the commercial skills of Radio-Télé-Luxembourg. It turned out that this cumbersome satellite project could only be viable with the inclusion of a foreign commercial operator. RTL has been granted two out of the four channels of TDF-I and it has obtained the exclusivity for advertiser-supported programmes to be broadcasted to French audiences via satellite. This favour has upset very much the public broadcasting sector in France, which remembers all too well that not long ago RTL was being accused by leading French socialist ministers and officials to be unscrupulous and to act as a Trojan horse for US programs, as a matter of fact much the same argumentation as is being used now against the Luxembourg national satellite project GBT/Coronet. This was at a time when CSM/RTM still nourished plans of its own DBS (LuxSat), plans that have been defeated by the French. Generally speaking, the policy debate has shifted in most countries from the issue of commercialism as such in its strong and mainly negative meaning, towards discussions of forms of private exploitation and conditions under which it can be allowed. This shift has been referred to as pragmatism, but it probably has something to do with the experience in a number of countries of "contained" commercialism in broadcasting and, of course, with the weakening of the original basis (regulation of airwaves) on which public monopoly and strict control were established. One might add that, given the uncertainty about the future of some of the new possibilities and the high costs, a public policy of allowing private industry to undertake some of the development costs in an experimental phase makes a good deal of sense and leaves open the possibility of subsequent public intervention.



## Cultural issues

Closely linked to the theme of commercialisation are issues encompassing the whole field of culture. In so far as a new challenge from the media is concerned, European culture finds itself right now in rather dire straits and the situation is supposed to become worse. The cultural sector at large is not prepared to take up the challenge represented by a multiplication of programmes.

This was highlighted last year when the European Commission published its Interim Report on "Realities and Tendencies in European Television".<sup>1)</sup> On the assumption that by 1990 each country will have on average 30 cable TV channels, 3 DBS channels and 3 conventional TV channels and on the basis of 10 hours per day and per channel of programming, one million to one million and a half hours per year would be needed to fill the new channels, of which the requirements of fiction programs alone would account for 500000 hours. The Commission drew attention at the same time to the enormous deficit in program production existing in Europe. Put together the major European movie producing countries (Germany, France, Italy and the UK) barely manage to come out with 1000 hours per year. The fear is that this huge gap will have to be filled by extra-European programs, predominantly of American origin. Already today 33 per cent of European TV programs consist of imported productions, originating mainly in the US.<sup>2)</sup>

The European Commission takes a more relaxed view on this by noting that the increase in the number of channels available to media users as a result of Community-wide broadcasting may have both positive and negative effects (increased variety as against poorer quality and less scope for financing individual programs). Italy is usually quoted as the example to avoid.

---

<sup>1)</sup> Document COM(83) 229 final.

<sup>2)</sup> Cf. Henry Ingberg, General Report to the 4th Conference of European Ministers for Cultural Affairs, Berlin May 1984, Council of Europe CMC - HF (83) 16.

The Commission also notes that the effects on program content and quality are closely linked with the scale and nature of the available sources of finance: " For example, in the case of an oligopolistic market structure the supplier might endeavour to find the lowest common denominator; programs which would not be anyone's first choice, but which people will prefer to watch rather than to switch off, are duplicated until the audience which can be captured by a more specialist program is greater than could be attained by re-duplicating the most popular type of program. In the case of Pay TV this tendency towards duplication and the production of programs with the lowest common denominator is less strong because the fact that there is a charge for programs provides program producers with a more accurate picture of audience preferences and this encourages the production of special interest programs. Community-wide broadcasting is unlikely to have such consequences, as it does not directly affect the way in which existing channels are financed. But channels with differing forms of finance will increasingly be competing for the same audience."<sup>1)</sup>

This moderately optimistic view is not shared by those aware of the weakness of the European production sector, a weakness that stems mainly from the existing scarcity of outlets. The pessimists are afraid that US programs will tighten their grip on European TV. The imbalance of television and movie trade between Europe and the US is a source of increasing frustration to European governments. Not only do their countries import more US programs than they want (thus hindering the growth of their domestic industries), they export even less than they would like (both to the US, which steadfastly resists "foreign" programming, and to other foreign

---

1) Commission of the European Communities, "Europe-wide Television: Greenpaper on the establishment of a Common Market in Broadcasting", COM(84) 300 final.

markets, which consistently prefer American products). The crucial question is, of course, whether the new technologies will exacerbate this trend or mitigate it.

The UK, usually considered to be the preferred entry gate for US programs, presents us with a pre-view of things to come. In the UK the extent of ownership by US companies of the new architecture of British television is a matter of some concern. Several US cable operators, including one of the very largest, American Television and Communications, a subsidiary of Time Inc., have been allowed a substantial stake in some franchise awards. US film producers and distributors also figure prominently in the proposed premium film channels for the UK and quite recently the same situation applies to Germany.

American involvement in European cable developments is paced by two main groups. First is Premiere International which consists of Columbia, Fox, Warner, HBO, Showtime/TMC and the British major Thorn/FMT. Then there is UIP Pay TV which groups Paramount, Universal and MCM/UA. The strategy of both these groupings is to find local partners in any market-place that is likely to develop Pay-TV. Both of these groups have scored already major breakthroughs in the Netherlands and Germany, apart from the UK. UIP has concluded a deal with the Dutch publisher VNU and the German publisher Bertelsmann. The German Beta-Taurus group has close links with Premiere. Public broadcasters do not have much to oppose to these strategies and their position is weakened by the fact that they tend to indulge in the same habit to rely extensively on American programs as do private broadcasters, in order not to lose audiences. For the time being they draw up monumental frescoes of European cultural programs, claiming that the European cultural vocation has to be defended against commercial and political enemies.

Identity is nevertheless the dominating cultural issue in most countries, caused by the perspective of a multitude of satellite transmitted foreign programs. Cultural preoccupations rejoin here the preoccupations derived from the threat of commercialisation. While the spilling of broadcasting over national borders has long been accepted as technically unavoidable, official tolerance evaporates when deliberate cross-border broadcasting on commercial grounds is intended. Luxembourg's RTL can sing a song about the difficulties you encounter.

It might be expected that this protectionist tendency will change markedly with the development of cable networks, as is already the case in Belgium, the Netherlands and Switzerland. Competitive cable operators hard-pressed to fill their programming needs have become eager to capture and distribute foreign broadcasts. The same benevolent attitude prevails in countries where the government is actually financing ambitious cable plans, as is the case in Germany. There are notable differences about the sensitivity of the integrity issue between the countries, depending upon the degree to which foreign programs are regarded as a threat to local, regional or national identity. In France regional movements are arguing for possibilities to preserve their cultural idiosyncrasies, partly against the centralising influence from Paris, partly against foreign programs. In Germany the Federal States claim the right for cultural autonomy and for promoting their identity.

Counter-measures are being tried in some countries in order to offset possible effects of satellite transmissions and cable networks. Programming restrictions seem to be the most obvious answer. In France, the government requires cable operators to limit programs of foreign origin to a maximum of 30 per cent of air-time.

In the Netherlands a government memorandum published in June 1984 on satellite and cable TV transmissions proposes that at least 5 per cent of total programming should consist of home-grown material and that this percentage should increase to 20 per cent over a five year period. One may ask what the basis is for this concern that exists in most countries. Is there a general uncertainty and scepticism with respect to foreign influence as such, or is there a genuine fear that the import of foreign TV programs will be even larger than at present, thus possibly upsetting the cultural values which are supposed to be reflected by the media? Quality of programming is also very prominent in the public debate and it has been stated explicitly as a goal in most statutes of public broadcasting institutions. The media are given an image-building and cultivating function and they should strive to keep high cultural standards, thus trying to keep the public from consuming mediocre mass culture. Because of the inevitable dilution of public broadcasting I have referred to in the section on commercialisation, the institutions find it increasingly difficult to respect these noble principles, afraid as they are to loose audiences to aggressive commercial operators. The issue about quality is partly related to two other cultural aspects, balance and diversity. A ruling by the German Federal Constitutional Court (1981) stated that the "Jäger" are obliged to guarantee that program content generally reflect the existing diversity of public opinion. Already in 1930 the Dutch government ruled that only broadcasting operators representing the religious or ideological "pillars" in society were allowed on radio. The secularisation process of Dutch society and the growth of pirate radio stations has however contributed to impair the pilarization theory.

## The Fate of Public Networks and State Control

Not very convincing attempts to police cabling in Europe give a good indication that governments which want to retain their controlling power over new media developments are fighting on losing grounds. Rules and regulations take place but merely to establish the legal and regulatory framework in which other actors operate. The same observation will most likely apply to attempts to control satellite television. The futility of most governmental policy in the media field will come out in the open in the near future when more than thirty channels will exist. Trying to stop under these circumstances foreign programming from entering the country will look very much like Don Quichotte fighting the windmills.

Two developments are perceptible right now in Europe; on the one hand an internationalisation of supply and on the other a decentralisation in use. The impression is that the former is the result of a strong financial injection, while the latter is more connected to the uses and gratifications sought by certain groups at local level. In the ideology of the free market and consumer sovereignty, the abundance through the internationalisation of supply also means more choice and a competitive disadvantage for decentralised programming. As a matter of fact it needs no excursion into critical media theory to point to the "levelling" tendencies within the program supply. Thus the second development I have indicated is bound to be on the losers' side sooner or later. It should be noted that the only place where public access could have been a real issue, notably the decentralised level, it is now fairly obvious that local programming is nothing more than the stepchild of the new media.

The basic question I tried to address in this paper relates however to the survival prospects of network television as we know it today in Europe. This question has to be answered in program terms and it

really boils down to the simple question whether or not future network programs will be accepted by future audiences whose attention is no longer focused on one or two national networks run by official monopolies. These organisations act as trustees of a so-called public interest to administer a frequency spectrum that is no longer scarce. These networks are going to find themselves in an electronic market-place in which they will no longer be the only actors on the stage. Most of the new contenders will give a more specialised, more flexible and more audience-centered response. It is this situation which leads most public broadcasters to adopt a gloomy view of future developments. One leading German representative portrayed his own kind recently in the following words:

"We are much like that boxer. We have had our golden days. The system is trying to hang on, but it is losing and losing badly."

It tends to be generally admitted by now that it will become difficult to see a role for classic European network programs in a landscape of extreme abundance both of sources and of appeal. It is widely recognized that the future TV watcher will have control over his own, individual diet and that he will not let himself be forced to swallow the predetermined menu which more often than not reflects the ideologies of politicians or the arrogance of network broadcasters rather than the actual preferences of the individual viewer.

I feel compelled to quote once more that excellent critic from the inside of public broadcasting, Hans Kimmel (ZDF), for the final word on the subject: "The networks, with their hospital diet offered to a viewer dependent on them, now find the nation in a self-service department store where network programs may not sell too well. It will be a child's dreamland. Everybody will be free to take ever more chocolate; who will care about good old 'Uncle Network' who wants to tell you that it is better to have a little bit of everything, in-

cluding some dishes that are not sweet? And that you have to behave like an adult after all! So where is the raison d'être of network programs? It is true that the chocolate eater will eventually suffer from a chocolate surfeit and possibly return to a healthier diet. Network broadcasting might be dead before the chocolate rush is over."I)

---

I) "Will network TV survive the 1980s: West Germany?", Intermedia, November 1982, volume 10/no.6.