

Television in Portugal

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Portugal's broadcast system has traditionally been an instrument of influence used by those holding or seeking political power: first the fascist dictatorship then the various factions in the struggles that followed the revolution. With the eventual calming of domestic turmoil, the broadcast system too slowly began to become more independent.

Early radio broadcasting can be dated back to 1914 and the amateur-operated Radio Hertz in Lisbon. Other short-lived experiments followed until 1925, when CTIAA began regular transmission (Erhardt, 1990, p. D188). This and other stations came under governmental control in 1930, followed by the formation of a state-run operation, the Emissora Nacional de Radiodifusao (ENR), in 1933. ENR was originally commercial-free, but accepted advertisements after 1950. Throughout the fascist dictatorship, its popularity was continually low in comparison to the private regional stations that had predated it (Optenhoegel, 1986). ENR provided three national radio channels and five regional programs, including service to the islands of Madeira and the Azores. Among the private stations, the main presence was Rádio Clube Português, which began in 1928, supported by private members and advertising revenue. In the late 1930s smaller private broadcasters combined into the transmission group Emissores Associados de Lisboa. A similar unification occurred in Oporto in 1941, with the formation of the Emissores do Norte Reunidos. Another important station was Radio Renascença, which has been run by the Catholic Church since 1936.

It is interesting to note that the world's first book on television was published in Portugal, as early as 1880 (TBI, 1990)! In 1955, Radio-Televisão Portuguesa (RTP) was established by the government, separate from ENR, as the national company for television broadcasting. RTP was owned jointly by the state (60 percent), private radio broadcasters (20 percent), and the public through representation by several banks (20 percent). RTP started broadcasting in 1957 and expanded both domestically and abroad, adding a second channel in 1968 and servicing the several Portuguese colonies existing at the time.

Of the two state-run television channels, RTP-1 broadcasts to all of Portugal and RTP-2, for a long time, to only about one-half of the country. RTP-2 currently serves 80 percent of the country. Each receives over half of its income from advertising under a system whereby commercial time is limited to eight minutes per hour, but the limits are often not reached. The selling of advertisements is assigned to a separate advertising agency which is an RTP subsidiary.

TV penetration in Portugal is the lowest in Western Europe. Many sets, however, are undeclared. Similarly, most videocassette recorders in use in Portugal were imported illegally to avoid high tariffs and thus were outside of official statistics.

The various Portuguese broadcasting institutions all played important parts in the 1974 revolution. It was a private radio station that signaled members of the armed forces over the airwaves to start their uprising, by playing an agreed upon

revolutionary song. Almost immediately, the rebels occupied the other radio and television transmitters. RTP played a major role in the political discussions that opened as a result of the revolution, and its lively programs initially epitomized the freedom of expression that had been won.

But just as the broadcasters had a major influence over the course of the revolt, the various political factions taking part in it sought to extend their own control over the broadcasters. Both RTP and ENR came under the control of the communist sympathizers and the wing of the military with which it was affiliated. In 1975, Rádio Renascença was occupied for several months by a Maoist workers' group that used its facilities to publicize its own messages. Programs from the USSR, Poland and Bulgaria were aired. Extreme leftist control over broadcasting was reduced only at the end of 1975, when democratic forces prevailed.

In that year, nearly all private radio stations were nationalized and, in a wide-reaching move, merged with ENR into the new public broadcasting authority Radiodifusão Portuguesa (RDP). There were, however, several exceptions to this sweeping nationalization, including Radio Renascença, which was returned to Church control. At the same time, the government assumed sole ownership of the television authority RTP.

These changes did not end the disputes over control of broadcast institutions. Politicization contributed to an enormous turnover in the membership of the various boards controlling RDP;

institutional continuity was reduced and party affiliation was emphasized in the sixteen changes of government, many provisional, that followed the revolution. This led to considerable organizational chaos, which was in turn complicated by financial problems. The revolution was also followed by eleven democratic governments, but several were led by the same prime ministers.

The broadcast institutions are regulated by a media council whose members are appointed by Parliament to assure pluralistic control. The Constitution also provides for the right of political parties, professional associations, and trade unions to receive access to an amount of broadcast time proportional to their size. The guarantees of independence enshrined in the 1974 constitution have been ineffectual, however, and the broadcast institutions have suffered through great uncertainty. In 1980, the governmental control over broadcasting was extended to cable television, though none had been introduced to Portugal at that time.

The popularity of the public channels, much of which consists of subtitled foreign offerings, is modest (Specht, 1986).

Foreign shows account for about 40 percent of total programming. Particularly influential are American films and the Brazilian-inspired soap operas known as telenovelas, which have had an impact on social customs. Also available to a number of viewers are several channels from Spain, which reach about one-quarter of the Portuguese population and capture 15 percent of the audience. Critics argue that RTP should aim at creating more

Portuguese programming (Torres, 1989, p. 14).

Pressures for the introduction of private media existed in Portugal for some time. In the 1970s, a pirate television station began operating openly in Oporto, Portugal's second largest city, but it was soon shut down by the government. In 1988, there were an estimated 600 radio pirates on the air, which could be licensed after the government capitulated and began to legalize them. In an effort to satisfy the demand for a wider selection of television programming, Portugal joined the pan-European satellite channel Europa-TV with the intention of using its own RTP-2 channel to rebroadcast the satellite programs terrestrially. However, Europa-TV closed its operations in 1986. This led to the consideration of commercial television. The 1976 and 1982 constitutions and subsequent broadcasting law stated that television should not be private property. Radio licenses were possible after a July 1988 law. However, this restrictive article was dropped from the revised 1989 Constitution. Broadcasting licenses for TV could therefore be subsequently issued, and the previous media council was replaced by a media regulatory authority to monitor the independence of communications media (Ehrhardt, 1990, p. D191).

During the presidential election campaign of 1985, the right-of-center Social Democratic party promised to reduce the government's role in broadcasting by eventually privatizing the RTP-2 television channel, two radio stations, and a dozen newspapers. Regionalized private television was also favored,

since regional transmitters built in Lisbon or Oporto could reach the majority of the country's population (Torres, 1989, p. 13).

Eventually, the government decided to license two private stations, with operations to start in 1991. Contenders were independent associations, politically connected media companies, and European media firms. They included Sociedade Independente de Comunicacao (SIC) and TV Nova. SIC was led by former Prime Minister Francisco Pinto Balsemao (who holds magazine interests in Expresso), and Granada Television, with links to Canal Plus, Hachette, and Brazil's TV GLOBO. TV Nova was led by SONEA, Portugal's largest consortium, and has ties with France's TF-1 (Screen Finance, 1990). Another consortium involved another major publisher. Silvio Berlusconi of Italy was also a participant in the process. A particular complication was that the Social Democrats had pledged in the past to give a license to Radio Renascensa. Yet the 1989 broadcast law outlining private television denied preferential treatment for the Church, suggesting that Church involvement would be unconstitutional. More likely was that Renascensa would share time in RPT-2. The law also required 50 percent of programs to be in Portuguese, with 10 percent of the programming produced domestically (Torres, 1990, p. 10). These production quotas are difficult to meet, and Portugal may thus become dependent upon Brazilian imports. The Constitution also requires access to RTP by various social and political movements, and a right of reply (Ehrhardt, 1990). These provisions will help transform RTP into a more independent

broadcaster, though the government was first actively putting its own partisans into control in the time-honored tradition of RTP. The introduction of cable television was also proposed, and was awaiting legal clarification of the channels it could carry. There are also several thousand satellite receiving antennas in Portugal, serving the unsatisfied demand for program diversity.

As Portugal moves into the European mainstream, so will its broadcasting media move from a politicized spoils system to a more open system. At the beginning of the 1990s, the viewing options available to the public was still more limited than anywhere else in Western Europe, but the 1989 Constitution made change likely.