The Theology of Satellite Television

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A long time has passed since Oscar Wilde or Bernard Shaw or Winston Churchill, it doesn't matter which, said that Britain and America were two nations separated by a common language. It is a paradox which is growing truer. The languages are, according to Richard Burchfield, editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, growing farther apart. His reasons were, I think, the increasing heterogeneity of America, especially its acceptance of Spanish language, and also its fondness for technical and psychological terms.

This persistent disparity should reassure those who like Mr. Jack Lang, the French Cultural minister, fear the loss of national cultural identity under the great tidal wave of American entertainment, now borne farther than ever by video and satellite as well as plain old movies and television.

But it tends to be forgotten by those of us who think of ourselves as inhabiting one English speaking television world. We conveniently ignore the divisions, the sacred ideas, the facts of politics and geography, that divide us and make developments on

one side of the Atlantic very alien ~~on~~ to the other, in spite of the satellites and cables that bind us.

This misunderstanding is a luxury that can no longer be indulged. Both sides of the Atlantic want to sell things to each other - home earth stations, consultancy services, television programs. And Europeans want, just as Americans watch the progress of the weather from Pacific to Atlantic coast, to see what is brewing up in the West to hit them next.

So what are the blind spots? What does each side fail to see when it looks at the other? I'd like to offer my personal view, based on the only thing journalists are expert at: asking questions.

Here is what I've gleaned. For a start, neither side appreciates the other's geography. Europeans do not even know the song that says "from sea to shining sea." They do not know how big the United States is; they do not feel it in their bones. This means that they do not understand at all the concept of broadcasting based on cities, which leaves large areas in between to catch-as-catch-can by cable television or home earth terminal.

Americans, from where they sit on the map, believe what they read in the papers. They see Europe as a "common market" --

one big salesplace, not as big as the United States but not so very much smaller and very much alike in prosperity and tastes, for do not they all, Swedes and Britains and Italians, love Dallas and Dynasty? Americans forget about the plurality of governments in Europe. They would not believe (and it is hard to find out) the contradictory array of laws and restrictions on broadcasting and advertising: Italy bans pet food; Britain, almost anything below the belt and Belgium, advertising itself. And they do not appreciate the protectionism and non-tariff barriers that go into preventing all kinds of things being sold across the borders of countries committed to free trade at least with each other.

These blind spots converge when it comes to satellites because these involve television itself -- that sensitive subject which, more than motherhood, is regulated by national laws which are derived from the ideas which these very different societies hold most sacred.

And these sacred ideas are in conflict between the two sides of the Atlantic. Americans place primary importance on freedom of speech amd have placed it among the amendments to the Constitution,// (and they are proud of deregulation.) Europeans and British,especially,believe in national sovereignty over broadcasting and its corollary -- public service broadcasting; that is, the use of public feeds to supply the entire population with a range of programmes according to some ill-defined but powerful sense of what is the national good. And they are proud of planning for social change. Each side interprets the

other's sacred ~~eyes~~ cows in the crassest, not to say cynical, light.

Let me start with <u>deregulation</u>. In Britain, this American phenomenon means letting market forces rip. Americans are doing it because they respect money-making, and only that, and want to get government out of the way. (This is not entirely false, like most prejudices.) It is seen by broadcasters as a cynical abandonment of the interests of the impoverished minority viewers. When Mr. Mark Fowler says, "the public interest is the public's interest," he is seen as disdaining all those television viewers who cannot vote with their pocketbook -- the old, the young and the disabled.

That there is no awareness that there are other forces behind deregulation comes -- as I see it -- from an inability of social planners to foresee change. Thus they do not see deregulators' wish to smooth the introduction of new technologies or the disenchantment with government's past policies that may have brought about unintended or undesirable results. Deregulation is thought to have little to offer Social Democrats. It is not appreciated that one of the important forces behind American deregulation was when the Federal Communications Commission, under a Democratic Administration, realized that all it had achieved in

a decade of labored rulemaking was to protect the broadcasting industry from economic harm for which there was no evidence.

As a result of such misunderstanding we get deregulation European style. An example of the misinterpretation of deregulation is the Conservative government's privatisation of British Telecom. They have simply turned the most powerful monopoly in the country over to the private sector, with puny regulation and no competition at all, except one hand-picked and deliberately enbelled competitor, Mercury. That is giving the communications revolution over to those who can make money out of it, the consumer be damned. Most likely, British telephone service - those call boxes you wrestle with at Heathrow - is not going to improve. Yet they think they are following America's lead in breaking up AT&T.

But fair's fair. The Americans look at public-service broadcasting and see paternalistic, elitist, control and condescension; a few decide what the masses should be believing. A lot of truth in that, too. As my uncle in Middleboro, Massachusetts once said to me, pityingly, "the BBC? That's all educational, isn't it?"

It is <u>not</u> and it is not just the BBC. Commercial television in Britain now considers itself public service broadcasting and, while it may seem self-serving, it wants protection, like the BBC, against newer forms of television entertainment -

it certainly submits to heavy regulation, even censorship at times; it hands over two-thirds of its profits before tax to the government, and does all kinds of programs against its inclination, at prime time.

There are three things Americans ignore, even when they admire the strengths of "Jewel in the Crown" or "Brideshead" or "Monty Python". One is that the public-service obligation includes the duty to blanket the country - to the outermost Hebrides - with signals of good quality and, in the case of the BBC, with four radio services as well. There are no pockets of have-nots. All pay the same, the philosophy goes in the case of the BBC's license fee, and all receive the same.

The second is that in the small of Europe, people count on their national service as a unifying experience, one of the distinctive lines between themselves and their all too close alien neighbors. On Sunday nights there is a BBC program called "Did You See", a discussion of television during the preceding week (not only the BBC's). The implication is that many people have been watching the same thing. They are certainly open to invitation to watch more channels than four, but they are comfortable with the easy-to-read television schedules which can be found in

any daily newspaper and are good in any part of the nation.

The third thing Americans forget is that Europeans pay license fees -- an annual tax on television households -- they do not feel they have gotten their television for nothing. So, when faced, say, with pay-TV, they feel that they are being asked to pay again for what they have paid for already.

These patterns of national broadcasting work against Open Skies policies. An interesting thing is that these philosophies are coming into collision because of satellites. If Home Box Office caught on like wildfire when it was spread cross the United States to cable systems by satellite, why should it not travel 3,000 miles in the other direction?

European entrepeneurs quite as much as Americans made this speculation. France, West Germany and Britain made plans for rapid cabling, to be paid for - directly or indirectly - by people's appetite for more video entertainment. But the governments forgot their own unwillingness to loosen the regulatory hold on the new choices that could be offered (and in West Germany, the right of each state to make its own rules on broadcasting, so that, until now, national transmission by satellite to cable systems, is forbidden). The explanation -- in Britain at least -- is that the two reasons cable grew in America in the first place do not exist: poor reception and a wish to see

movies uncut and uninterrupted by commercials. The experience is not - strictly speaking - transferable.

Turning now to direct broadcasting from satellites, the difference in view is even more striking and more set for a head-on clash. Back in 1977 at the World Administrative Radio Conference, the Americans and Canadians recognized that they did not see DBS developing as other countries viewed it. They refused at that point to agree to the plan which gave most countries of the world enough frequencies for five channels of satellite-to-home television, and a place in orbit from which to beam them down.

Six years later when they came to do their own regional plan, they congragulated themselves on their wisdom. Advances in receiver technology meant that you could reach small home dishes with satellites of much lower power than was dreamed of in 1977's philosophy. So these countries advanced on Europe to sell some of their satellites and they are mystified by the insistence of France, Britain and West Germany to go ahead with programs of high-powered satellites with a range far wider than their national territories -- all they are supposedly interested in.

I had lunch not long ago with an American aerospaceman who was shaking his head. "They could reach the same national audience with a medium-powered satellite," he said. "And they

could get more channels."

"They don't want more channels," I said.

"They - don't - want - more channels?" he repeated after me, as if I had said they did not want any more sunshine than the meagre ration they get already.

No, I had to tell him. They don't. They do not want more than three DBS channels to dilute the national television mix. But, and I speak about Britain, it is not just loss of sovereignty that they are worrying about. They argue that too many channels reduce choice - that more means less, that the only way to fill a dozen channels would be with filler material. And, they,believing this is an economic argument at heart,are sure that if viewers are to be wooed to buy or rent DBS dishes they must have an alluring alternative to what they already get over the air, and that means a DBS service of high quality. They just have not figured out what it is to be.

Who is right? We shall see. I think Luxembourg's Coronet project is the most interesting development in communications today. It is where West meets East - the raw force of the new world, if Tom Whitehead will forgive me - crashing up against the artifice of Europe. A medium-powered satellite with 16 transponders to be rented out to whoever thinks they can made money on them (but no porn). The forces against it are formidable -

the European PTTs plus the broadcasting monopolies, a double whammy - but so are market forces that are pushing it. The kind of high-powered DBS that the European Big Three want is proving too expensive even for their own narrow aims.

The advent of transborder satellite services brings with it another idea whose time may have come for Europe and something that is important for the medium-powered satellite. It is freedom of information. Computers plus satellites have created the possibility of instant access to information. Can European ingenuity find a way to stop it? The satellites are creating programs that waft over national boundaries. Can European laws stop commercials from crossing?

There are three developments that give grounds for hope that the old rules controlling information will be changed. One is that the EEC, the Common Market, wants to unify advertising standards so that cable and satellite programs can move freely across borders. The other is that there is a move among liberal lawyers in Europe to interpret Article 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights as a European version of the American First Amendment. It commits signatories to permitting freedom of expression with very narrow exceptions. Dangerous American ideas - such as that even a ban on liquor or cigarette advertising may violate the right to free speech, if you interpret that to include commercial speech - are now beginning to be looked at.

So Europe may be forced, by the democratic nature of the

new technologies, to loosen its stranglehold on who may know - or view - what. A New World Order triumphant!

Will the public's right to non-marketplace television - a decently financed public broadcasting service - cross the Atlantic in reverse direction? Of course not.

If I had to choose between the two, I'd choose freedom of information, freedom of government control of the content of television. But with a heavy heart. I'd be giving up much that has enriched my life and my children's.

Maybe that is too pessimistic. Someone may find a way to have deregulated television and quality too. Maybe, however, we have to accept that some ideals are incompatible.

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