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Knowing No Boundaries:
EC Television and the Establishment of a
United European Culture

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Abstract

Contemporary television has many purposes within a society. It can support traditional beliefs, foster new ideas, support or subvert social policy, and it can be used for much greater political purposes than to merely inform or entertain. As the European Community experiences market forces that change the type of television and the availability of video content, the social uses and the former government or industry philosophies will undoubtedly clash. Moreover, satellite, cable, videocassette and videodisc technologies are changing traditional media behaviors as well as offering new business opportunities and markets for visual content.

This presentation focuses on the role of television and related technologies as they bring regional, national, inter, and intra-national information and entertainment into homes within the European Community. Structural issues of media institutions within nations and policies created to control television content are discussed and a proposal to ensure the viability of domestic television that concentrates on the perpetuation of regional culture is proposed.

Introduction:

In the early 1980s television in Europe generally treated the audience as groups of "publics"--that is, as communities of individuals with certain similar values, assumptions, goals, and needs, and defined by their national languages, traditions, and geographical boundaries. Since the start of television in the 1950s throughout most of Europe, broadcast industries were given great responsibility for supporting a shared sense of culture for their publics, usually through state-run broadcast systems that closely monitored programs that supported local, national, and regional values.

Today however, the economic imperatives that have united the European nations into a new "community" have recontextualized the audience as a "market," and the former state television broadcasters are wondering whether their programs or professions will survive as Europe makes its transition into the world's largest market in 1992.

Furthermore, different technologies, such as satellite and cable could provide a greater number of program outlets in a

broader market while at the same time guaranteeing that channels are allocated for traditional state programming, but history tells us that more television channels generally contribute to an underfunding of smaller-market television. I believe that what will be most destructive to the state broadcasters is the adherence to certain media industry practices that may marginalize state systems even though specific institutional and policy structures have been proposed to safeguard these industries. The business practices used in developing the EC philosophy are subjecting cultural institutions to the role of distributors of product rather than producers of programs.

I fear that the short-term benefits of deregulatory practices are driving large-infrastructure cultural industries in Europe (like television) at the expense of traditional cultures. Ultimately these business practices could portend a future in which all traditional European cultural industries (including print, theater, museums, music, radio, etc.) are systematically undermined in favor of only those forms that produce substantial monetary gain.

In this cultural equation we must also address adequate attention to the cultural impact of small, ethnotronic technologies (like vcrs and audio-tape recorders) and their role in cultural maintenance and change. These technologies and the software that is easily duplicated and distributed also have potential to erode traditional culture, and often do so while circumventing political, economic and legal structures. At this point there appears to be little attention given to the impact of these technologies and this content in the EC.

On the surface, the debates involving EC television have split into two camps. One group, represented by what journalist Robert Marcom has called the "Europe-firsters" (1989, p. 43) would like to see policies established that would protect state broadcast systems. This group fears that the attempts the European Community is making toward protecting local and regional television operations are too few and ineffective. The other group, which may be representing a "Europhoria" (Wentz, 1988, p. 2) ignores the difficult details of the transition into the EC and believes that pan-Europeanism will triumph with a newly defined image of a united European culture, downplaying regional and local differences.

I would like to ask the question of whether it is possible for the EC to "have it all"--maintenance of local and regional culture through television, a financially solid inter and intra-national service, and program menu that is large enough to satisfy the diversified appetite of many "publics." I believe it is possible, though I see little evidence indicating that adequate steps are being taken to make this a reality.

Plans for television

As variations on this question becomes a theme for discussion, it is important to address the many protectionist plans for traditional state broadcasting and the future of television in the European Community. The EC interest in television was legitimized with the October, 1989 directive on broadcasting titled Television Without Frontiers. The document articulated several issues, many of which have provided "spin-off" programs. To keep state broadcasting and cultural sovereignty viable, the directive suggested the use of: (1) quota systems; (2) encouragement of independent production, (3) programs that will encourage and foster indigenous production, (4) special consideration of content matters that includes licensing arrangements, and, (5) encouragement of international co-production of programming. Each of these issues has some potential to safeguard state and pan-European programming, but we must ask whether any of these plans can be effective in a climate in which structural change has pre-dated protectionist policies. In the past 10-12 years, many government-owned broadcasting companies have already been privatized. The number of television channels in most of the EC countries have proliferated through satellite, and cable use, and terrestrial technologies have already been opened to programming from abroad and to advertising. The number of private television production companies has exploded, and many have diversified to the point that any future legislation or regulation would not significantly change their status as providers of media and/or information product. Therefore, the suggested regulations being put forth now will be conflicting with practices that have already systematically undermined state broadcasting in some countries.

The quota question

Though Television Without Frontiers suggested that the EC nations adopt a 50% program quota on non-EC material, implying the other half would be "European," the directive does not specify what would constitute this category. Would this mean "pan-European," or "state produced" material? Would it have to be written by, acted by, and produced by Europeans? The directive was intentionally written to be "porous" enough to allow a wide definition of what constitutes a "European work" (Coopman, 1989, p. 2).

The quota system has been attacked by individuals such as Helmut Thoma, managing director and director of programming for one of West Germany's most successful private channels, RTL Plus, who called the quota system "makeshift regulation [that] will be ineffective in the end... (To quota or not to quota, p. 57). Already, program suppliers from other parts of the world (and notably from the U.S.) have established structures to bypass this quota system. For example, Paramount has purchased 49% of

British Zenith, and CapCities/ABC has attained 49% in the West German producer/distributor Tele Munchen. The holdings of these U.S. based firms may be defined as "European" under the terms of the present directive. This system of "laundering" television content seems unnecessary when you consider that even with the 50% quota, the European market will be so large that US companies could still expand their revenues further without the creation of programming power blocs.

Different nations within the EC have reacted to the quotas by reflecting their own interests. France initially mandated 60% European programming, though a new rule may change that and force the percentage down toward the 50% Euro-mandate. The U.K. had established its own quota of maximum of 14% foreign programming (translated into 14% American programming) which is a questionable figure since much more of the U.K.'s programming is already produced in the U.S. and other English-speaking countries. Additionally, Belgium, Denmark, and Sweden have clung to controlled TV (Guterl, 1988, p. 61) and have at various times indicated that they would not wish to open their television outlets to other program sources.

The harsh reality is that quotas seldom work. Consider the case of the Canadian Radio and Television Commission's imposed quotas to protect Canadian broadcasting from their U.S. neighbor. Radio (AM and FM) and television content was required to represent certain percentages of material produced in Canada, by Canadian artists, in an effort to protect the entertainment industries. As the number of communication channels increased and the entertainment industries reacted to the newer forms of cable, videocassettes, etc., and the broadcast signal spill continued from the heavily populated northern U.S. to the heavily populated south border of Canada, the Canadian regulators remained at a loss to provide audiences for the CBC.

Even the role of state broadcasting changed as Canada's once powerful CBC (established to provide radio in 1932 and television in 1952) experienced growing pains. Originally the CBC was founded to provide programming for the two dominant language groups in Canada, English and French. As the CBC's position evolved, the organization assumed the responsibility of providing local and regional programming as an alternative to the commercial, independent systems. The 1968 Broadcasting Act demanded that the CBC be a national service which:

...must safeguard the cultural, political, social and economic fabric of Canada... strengthen a sense of regional identity, be the agent of communication between the disparate parts of the land, foster Canadian talent... and keep viewers tuned in enough to justify their small share of taxes (Miller, 1987).

The mandate cites criteria that could be applied to the nations of the EC today, and reaffirms the attempt to provide for local and regional programming while still acting as a national service for a shared context of continental identity, but the competition for audiences from the independent programmers in Canada has forced another interpretation of the 1968 mandate. The current Broadcasting Act passed in the House of Commons this past winter is still pending in the Senate. This bill would remove the CBC'S mandate to "promote national unity" and change it to "contribute to shared national consciousness and identity" (Wilson-Smith, 1990, 10). The difference may appear to be subtle, but the key words have to do with a removal of the CBC's purpose to promote, and relegate its function to that of "contributor." The implications for funding are clear--the CBC will be less of a priority in future Canadian budget allocations.

In many ways, the debate over the future of the CBC is similar to the debate over the role of television in the EC, and it may foretell problems for the financial future of local and regional programming in Europe as well.

Independent production

Television Without Frontiers also issued a directive that 10% of airtime or of the program budgets of European broadcasters should be allocated for the production of independent product. Again, this will be an advantage for those large producers who have courted US production companies, and the 10% does not guarantee a time slot for maximum audience, nor does the allocation of program budget ensure that these offerings will indeed be developed and aired. But despite this level of the directive, other steps have been taken that are more pragmatically oriented. Programs for indigenous production

Before 1990, the European MEDIA Programme had generated several projects that were to focus on some aspect of defending "national identities against the challenges that come from outside Europe" (Fitzgerald, 1988-1989, p. 14). The projects include schemes to:

- ...promote regional production, film animation and independent production marketing, the establishment of scriptwriting, production, management and technical courses, and the setting up of a co-operative low-budget film distribution network--all of which make sense in a European context without raising questions of national identity or the forging of a new European sensibility (Fitzgerald, p. 15).

The most interesting project was the European Script Development Scheme (ESDS) which took the position that the most effective way of supporting indigenous production would be at the scripting stage. A board of governors representing producers, broadcasters, and writers from the EC states, and an executive director and script advisory group would spread 4.5m over three years to fund around 100 scripts, of which, about 20-25 would be produced (Fitzgerald). Though it is still too early to assess the effectiveness of this program, it does encourage maintenance of local values and culture, and it keeps at least some artists and production teams working, and the local connection could reflect greater maintenance of local values and culture.

Consideration of content

Albert Scharf, EBU President sees the availability of a greater number of distribution channels as the best feature of eventual pan-European. He suggests that this may be accomplished by programming through thematic channels, such as music, sports, and news (Professor Albert Scharf..., 1990, Jan. 1, p. 96.) Scharf feels the best way to protect European production is:

...to stabilize and guarantee solid financing of the existing broadcasters in their environment, including all the necessary legislative steps to organize sufficient income, be it through license fees or advertising, not just for public service broadcasting, but all broadcasters. Commercial broadcasters will have to be stimulated much more to original production and not just to distribute bought programs (Scharf, p. 96.).

Early plans for an EBU-supported European all-news TV channel were postponed for financial and bureaucratic reasons, but in the meantime, Ted Turner's Cable News Network provides one source of video-distributed news, and NBC's international news service provides yet another. How did these services get a share of the market when the EBU, which already has an internal news pool in Eurovision, providing three to five daily news feeds to members each day could not compete for an intra-European service? The EBU claims to have been unable to pull this off because of financial, editorial, and legal issues, but the real reason has to do with the power of more established services, like Turner's CNN and Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation. By taking advantage of the slow development of a coordinated plan for EC television, entrepreneurs have established a set of business practices that the EC must react to, rather than predict and plan for. In the absence of any effective protectionist measures for local and regional television, various consortia of entrepreneurs have already positioned themselves to ward off the more recent directives. The new European organization, the

Association for Commercial Television (ACT) with five founding members of the group--France's TF1, Luxembourg's CLT, Britain's ITV, and Sat1 of West Germany and Silvio Berlusconi's Fininvest of Italy was formed because the members felt that commercial interests wanted to have a representative body in regional discussions of the audio-visual industry. Suffice it to say, this group has few financial limitations, and a great amount of power through vertical integration of program services, means of distribution, and co-production activities.

Another problem for the content area has to do with bidding for special programs, like sports. Since so many of the national broadcasting organizations have been privatized, the fees for special events, such as the Wimbledon Tennis Tournament have been too high for the EBU to compete, even though only the EBU currently can guarantee 100% European penetration. The licensing of certain program content has also been discussed. Though it was part of the original Television Without Frontiers directive, the licensing issue had been dropped because of its controversial nature. Now, other texts suggesting licensing of cable and satellite transmissions of foreign broadcasts, videotex, and videotapes are being discussed (EC urging obligatory licenses for b'casters, 1989, p. 5). Revenue from the licensed services would be collected by an agency similar to the U.S. Royalty Tribunal for recorded work revenues, and it is possible that some system of subsidizing local, regional, or independent works could be included for partial funding from the revenue pool.

International co-production

While international co-production could be a way to increase audiences, the challenges to programming are enormous. International co-production may be seen to be a short term solution to reconciling cost, and quality, and is certainly in the spirit of cooperation, but the end product could read like a recipe including "a plot from a best-selling novel, add an Anglo-American cast, throw in an Italian or an Australian star or two, film in central European capital, or better yet, several" (Marcom, p. 43).

Will these directives work?

Different nations in the EC are struggling with the rules of Television Without Frontiers with different levels of success. What is at stake is cultural sovereignty--and who should have the responsibility to monitor it. Unfortunately, in today's world cultural issues usually take a back seat to the monetary issues that drive the very purpose behind the European Community. The dominant philosophy is now one in which market forces are strong enough to marginalize more esoteric questions of culture and the perpetuation of local and regional values. There is no

indication that this philosophy will change over the next few years, since the intervention of a market philosophy gains momentum as time goes by. For example, let's consider how large the EC market can become. Already by 1987, advertising through media channels to the EC was an \$8 billion business. By 1990 the figure was \$12.5 billion, and by 1998, it is estimated that 40% of European advertising revenue will be spent on cable and satellite television outlets reaching 120 million homes (Guterl, p. 61).

With these imperatives, quota systems seemed doomed to failure. Independent production could provide one measure of protection, but the 10% figure is low, and present directive does not guarantee that independent productions are going to be just that--independent, or whether they will be hidden by poor time slots or subjective scheduling. Programs that encourage indigenous production are good in spirit, but have the potential to create bureaucracies that could bog down the creative spirit--and even if the structure can be made to work, the actual number of programs to be produced may still be relatively small. An increase in the number of communication channels may be the key to offering a diversified program menu, but if some of those channels are supported by advertising and the state channels are continually underfunded, the demise of state broadcasting could be imminent. Licensing rebroadcasts of foreign content makes sense, but perhaps the licensing issue should also be addressed with regard to other, less obvious forms of media, like videocassetts and discs. And finally, international co-production has the potential to backfire and just copy U.S. mini-series. The expense of these productions seldom justifies the market they receive.

Can state broadcasting survive?

In the entrepreneurial spirit of the EC, directives toward television have sought to reduce legal structures that would impinge upon profit-making opportunities. Broadcasting and signal distribution across state borders have been facilitated by plans "harmonizing conflicting national restrictions on TV programming and advertising" (To quota or not to quota, 1989, p. 57). What complicates matters is that television broadcasting is no longer a simple issue related to sending messages through airwaves. Broadcast signals know no geographic boundaries, and technologies that distribute television today include satellites, Low Power Television (LPTV), and multi-point distribution (MDS). What's more, cultural zones do not necessarily coincide with national boundaries.

What might have once been the domain of broadcast television is now distributed through other means such as cable and fiber optic, cassettes, and discs. Digital technologies can duplicate video and audio productions so efficiently and so precisely, that no one can tell the difference. The software has a tremendous capacity to circumvent traditional legal structures for sales and

accountability, and they foster a burgeoning business in pirated content. Who will be most affected by this operation? Again, artists and smaller production operations. Because these distribution agents carry more than just television content, the issue of tv becomes conflated with the distribution of computer data that ranges from transfer of banking, business information, governmental information and other information services. But because these technologies increase the ability of program providers to reach specific target audiences, they provide an ideal format for advertising and the promotion of products and goods.

Some of these distribution agents have also had an impact on other industries. For example, VCRs and videocassettes have created a crisis for the film industry. "Today, revenues from cassettes exceed the box office earnings from most films, but the cassette market has provided a major new revenue source for the industry, especially for films intended for smaller, specialized audiences. (Fitchett, 1990, p. 38). These smaller format technologies and accompanying software could become even bigger business in the future. As such, they could provide a useful outlet for video material that would not be televised to a larger market--such as cultural and traditional genres that would appeal to smaller publics.

The current trajectory in television control and programming in Europe does not necessarily sound a death knell to regional or local programming. For state broadcasting to survive and maintain a sense of cultural integrity, European television needs to consider ways to keep pumping blood into these industries. As we in the United States have learned, deregulation affords a level playing field in the short-term, but after the teams have played on that field for awhile, ruts and bumps inevitably make the field a little-less-than level.

What may unite the countries of Europe is a strong intellectual tradition that influences spiritual and ethical relationships. Furthermore, cultural television is not an oxymoron. It connotes quality, respect for tradition, and values that are specific to groups of peoples. For the EC to assure that cultural/regional programming is maintained, I would propose the following:

--that the EC set up a distribution board for programming that is produced within the state systems, and require that a percentage be syndicated to all cooperating countries. The distribution board could also oversee a system of royalty or license fees that would subsidize the poorer nations (like Ireland or the Basque region) so that they will have funding to maintain some level of local and regional production and access to a distribution market.

--the EC should be investigating the use of LPTV and cassette distribution as a means of keeping regional cultures alive and in circulation. These programs could have particular benefit to educational institutions, and even though they garner a relatively small audience,

--an accountability phase should be built into the system. For years in the U.S. stations had to report how they were meeting the needs of the local community through a system of ascertainment. I would suggest the European state systems undertake this type of accountability as well, but that the cost for such an activity should come from contributions of the private broadcasters.

--I believe more attention to the dayparting of programs should be addressed to focus on state and pan-European offerings that should not be relegated to the wee hours of the morning, or less popular times. These time slots may have to be subsidized in some way, perhaps through funds collected through commercial advertising and redistributed to the other various culture industries, including theater, museums, etc. --most important, is that an adequate funding structure be guaranteed to support and maintain local and regional operations, protect jobs, and guarantee that culturally relevant indigenous product is available. Even if it maintains only small audiences, it has to be alive to survive.

Television can be both a catalyst for cultural integration and change. Despite the problem of programming intended for people of various languages, television can express emotion and feeling more effectively than many other forms of media because it is an intimate experience one has in the privacy of one's own home. This means that television technology and television content is seen as far more effective than many other forms of media, such as print, film or theater. Despite the language difficulty, there are certain values that are inherently human and can portray the human experience, and can maximize the potential of such an intimate medium. Television can express a feeling or emotion through music, sound effects, or the creation of a visual landscape that can be tightly aligned with local and regional values.

For these reasons, television in the EC must be protected. As a monitor and expression of culture, it should not be given over to mass-market appeals that further subject the medium and its creative people to mass-marketing of product. Once any standard for monitoring television content is abandoned, the potential of the medium is also lost.

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