

DISCOURSES AND DEBATES IN INPUT ABOUT PUBLIC SERVICE TELEVISION

The basis to legitimate the model of public service television is the quality of its programs. This is the premise in which resides much of the television production selected for INPUT throughout its history. From the plurality, diversity and innovative year after year and in an implicit manner, the different discourses about public service television have emerged through the INPUT's Archive. However, in some cases (few of these discourses are openly expressed in different ways, contexts, and proposals: the audience, quality of programming, financial support, concurrence, administration of the model, new technologies, are topics that articulate the plurality of these discourses, some of which are polemical, and most of the time with an open end. The analysis of INPUT's archive¹ from this explicit perspective allows us to access to this debate from different actors, with diverse experiences and contexts, but all of them with a common denominator, the compromise with quality public television.

Context of INPUT

"Among the criteria for selecting programs prevail: innovative spirit both in the form as well as the content; that suppose a challenge to the professional values traditionally established; that have generated polemic in their countries of origin due to the form or content; or that intend overcome social, cultural, racial or economic barriers".² From this perspective INPUT appears as a space of proposals and debates from the production perspective.

In INPUT the debate occurs particularly in the parallel sessions in which the issues related to the production of programs are addressed. Normally, these debates are reflected on the *Final Rapport* of each encounter in the form of a brief report. One of these debates was recorded by the German Television in INPUT'98 in Stuttgart, program entitled: "Ser o no ser: El futuro de la televisión pública"³. Although this is not a program selected by INPUT, it represents the debate concerning to this study in the context of INPUT.

According to James Day, "INPUT rarely offers a forum for debating the topic of public television. The encounter in Stuttgart was unusual in this respect. Many of the participants are producers of programs and not executives of public television, and they do not have much interest in the structural or philosophical details of public television. Their primary preoccupation (and maybe the only one) is how to get the introduction of the program in the programming competition".⁴

Obviously, this is not a forum specialized to debate, but the proposal of programs, their selection and the commentaries allow to establish by themselves, a particular discourse. Thus, they highlight the existence of really innovative and creative programs, which break the conventional molds and became inflexible points setting new stages in the long history of the INPUT and the model of public service television.

¹ . See reference in the final table.

² LARREGOLA, G. "Cuando los programas de televisión son estimulantes. INPUT 99, la conferencia mundial de la televisión pública". Treballs de Comunicació #12 diciembre 1999. Societat Catalana de Comunicació. Barcelona.

³ INPUT'98 Stuttgart. See Appendix 1

⁴ Interview OnLine, August 10, 2003.

Conceptualization of the model

The debate showed in the Belgian program “Le pieds dans le plat”⁵ is characteristic and even paradigmatic. Taking the advantage of the presence of different members of the Council of Administration, two important discourses emerge: on one hand the more conservative, generally expressed by politicians, where the traditional terms of public service are acknowledged, but seeking from this formality, an urgent functionality and justification.

This functionality is supposed to guarantee the ‘profitability’ of the investment from public funds to a project apparently over dimensioned and deficient. Regarding the justification, it is interesting to underline the urgency for establishing the difference between public and private television in order to defend the support and legitimacy of the former. “The problem is, then, to determine what the difference between public service television and the rest is” proposes Philippe Monfils of Liberal Party. Similarly, the Minister of the French Community Mr. Aselme argues that “there is no need to redefine public service, the objectives of the RTBF won’t change, what have to be determined is the place of the RTBF”⁶.

The other great discourse of the debate is presented in the program “Le pieds dans le plat”⁷ by the professionals, the university professor Mr. Hanotiau and the representative of the Ecologist Party Henri Simons who defend the need to redefine the model of public service in order to ensure the logic, character and the mere existence of the model. The academic stated out that “the public service is a group of objectives. The public service is to guarantee the respect pluralism of ideas and confront them for the benefit of the spectator. To guarantee the independence and autonomy, not only in the face of possible control by the authority, but also the control of the market and its authorities” is evident that this debate, for some scarcely efficient, always involves a reference to the *competition* of the other television.

In this sense, with an attitude without complexes and with a discourse from a different perspective, it is important to emphasize how the BBC’s representative, David Docherty⁸, proposes the need for changing the model, since the environment changes, the audience changes, and the technology changes. If everything is being transformed we should also transform ourselves. Likewise, James Day suggests that “never before we have needed a public television as much as today to have quality of information. Following the same argument, the South African representative Govin Red underscored the importance of public television in the face of underdevelopment and democratic transition.”¹⁰

⁵ INPUT’94 Montreal. See Appendix 1

⁶ “The problem is not to know or define what the public service is. The public service has existed when there was a monopoly in television, now there are 25 television channels that also broadcast cultural and entertainment programs”. INPUT’94 Montreal. See Appendix 1

⁷ INPUT’94 Montreal. See Appendix 1

⁸ David Docherty of BBC argues “If we compare the moment of the emergence of television, with the current situation of digital change, we see that now there is no a public model mentality and maybe for that reason they do not propose to do a television with quality. We have the willingness to do a quality television. The digital world is different and we intend to get the maximum benefit from that perspective”. INPUT’94 Stuttgart. See Appendix 1

⁹ INPUT’98 Stuttgart. See Appendix 1

¹⁰ INPUT’98 Stuttgart. See Appendix 1

The Audience

One of the most recurrent topics in the debate is audience. Its integrative character of the different faces of the debate (justification, shared element with the private television, interlocutor, etc.) provides the issue of the audience the sense of omnipresence. Closeness, acceptance, knowledge, opinion, election, service participation, are some of the epithets that different actors use in relationship with the audience.

It is important to mention the experience of Access TV¹¹ and how the audience is understood differently: from the participation of local television stations, basis of PEG and an emergent phenomenon in Europe, to the notion of interactive television and the irruption of the Internet. From the boom of local television as alternative to large private networks in United States to the present moment in which this specific model is under evaluation. In Europe (from the identity and regions), the proximity of audience becomes an element that reformulates and strengthens the model of public service. In the session of Nantes, from the experiences and different references there is a reflection about the profile of the audience, which is formulated in a way more dynamic and closer than before, thanks to technological changes, the incorporation of the market and the new audiovisual proposals.

In the context of the Digital Era, the emergence of Internet in the middle of the 1990s though incipient, poses a challenge that public television stations have to face as they want to access their audience increasingly changed and fragmented, in a progressively more complex environment. According to the BBC's representative, "Television will prevail, but we might not forget Internet, since it will transform conditions of working, and through the net we will get recorded things. The relationship between the digital world and television is marked by the interaction, which will make all television stations multi-channels".¹²

Programs and Programming

In the different discourses analyzed, the option for quality is also recurrent. The Belgian professionals of RTBF consider quality as the best guarantee of public service and specificity. But at the same time, they point out the financial difficulties entailed by production within the public service television model. Jean Philippe Art (Director of RTBF's Center Production of Charleroi) argues that "it is not easy to produce quality television with few means. The RTBF not only purchases some programs and ideas, but also produces their own productions. These get enough audience and that is what people expect from public service. People understand that we want to broadcast quality programming"¹³

The need for cooperation between the different networks of public television is recurrent so that they can face the challenge of quality and high costs. The proximity of the content to the audience and the format of traditional programs of public service (informative, magazines, documentaries, etc.) are some of the more specific proposals that might nurture public service programming. Hansheiner Boelte pointed out in Stuttgart the relevance of creating a regionalization of the supply and empathy with the audience, "if you do what the audience wants, requires and needs, then you have

¹¹ INPUT'90 Edmonton. See Appendix 1

¹² INPUT' 98 Stuttgart. See Appendix 1

¹³ INPUT'94 Montreal. See Appendix 1

guaranteed success. For this reason, regional programs and the promotion partnerships with other European networks have been started”.

With a more ambitious proposal the representative of BBC in Stuttgart emphasized the need for seeking new formats in order to attract the new generations and, at the same time, to balance the programming with a clear commitment to quality. This proposal of quality should be compatible with the success of the network's audience. To do so, in a hypercompetitive context, might encounter many more difficulties. David Levy, chair of planning and development of European policies for the BBC, asserts that “public television has to be the emblem against the monopoly of privatization, the fragmentation of society and defense of quality contents”¹⁴

As we can see, there is here a clear confrontation between sensitivity and commercial logic, expressed in the session of Nantes and the search for specificity debated in Belgium and Stuttgart. In the face of this duality, the discourse of public television accepts concurrence, but with the capacity of a proposal that guarantees both the quality and the success with the audience.

Appendix

RESEARCH FILE

Objectives and methodology: This paper conducts a content analysis from a sample of programs of INPUT, which in one way or another controversial, debate about the public television service and develop some aspects as alternatives for its future. From these criteria an exploration of INPUT's archive was conducted using different resources: the examination of the *bibles*, use of the archives of the Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF) and the search of key words in the INPUT's archive.

Selection of programs: “KB-TV: or Introduction in to watching Television”, “TV-TV: The television Revolution”, “The fine art of separating people from their money, Part I Shock”. INPUT'97 Nantes (programs that propose a reflection about the audiovisual medium). “Le Pieds dans le Plat” INPUT'94 Montreal (program directly related with the theme of the debate of public television). “Everyone's Channel” INPUT'90 Edmonton (program that develops a specific model of public service television, particularly the proximity and direct relationship with the audience). Finally, out of the selection “Ser no ser: el futuro de la televisión pública” INPUT'98 Stuttgart.

¹⁴ MORAGAS, M. de, PRADO, E. (2000). Op. Cit. P. 308.