AN OVERVIEW OF THE MAIN CONTENTS AND VALUES LINKED WITH THE NOTION OF
TELEVISION QUALITY: THE SPECIFIC CASE OF “DIVERSITY”.

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SUMMARY

The aim of the article is to identify the main interlocutors and areas of definition of the notion of television quality. The notion of quality as applied to television enables us to introduce a significant range of nuances that contribute to the debate on the aims and purposes of public television. Special emphasis is placed on the development undergone by the diversity factor as synonymous with TV programming quality; the diversity factor, which effectively generates as much, if not more, consensus than the television quality factor tends to figure in the debate as an inevitable one, despite the fact that due to its development it has been the economic factor in its most neo-liberal application that has adopted a leading role.

KEY WORDS

Television quality, Programming quality, TV programme quality, Public television, Public service, Professional habitus and quality.

ARTICLE

Introduction

In the modern context, in a country like Spain with clearly generic and outmoded laws affecting television – not only as regards its objectives, its specific functions as a public service, its scope in terms of authority and for the production of programme content, but also lacking any instrument for genuine monitoring with an exemplary nation-wide sanctioning capacity – the coming to power of a Socialist government, which
seems to be determined to reform the television system, has taken the lid off the problem concerning what elements should be present, but are lacking, in the context of television generally as a medium, and public television in particular.

The modern context also presents certain novel elements that are re-directing the debate on the aims and standards of public television towards a series of values that, despite forming part of what is politically correct, prove treacherous in their application because they are a further concession to the market and to neo-liberal thinking, to the detriment of what ought to be the articulation of a public television system that is genuinely committed not only to the basic rights and liberties of the public but also, in a particular and concrete way, to the social reality of which it forms part. This article will deal specifically with some significant developments that the diversity factor has had as a synonym for television quality.

The debate involving the aims and content of public television, while only a recent one in this country, is a recurring debate elsewhere, with significant long-standing traditions, through which the different social agents with clear interests in the sector – politicians of different persuasions, TV companies, public institutions, the advertising sector, the huge media companies, viewers’ associations – formulate those proposals that, although appealing to the common good, prove beneficial or favourable to their own private or group interests. However, the discourse formulated around “television quality” appears to be clothed in a veneer of scientific neutrality. It is a concept that generates a consensus and legitimises its authors yet, like the concept of public television or public service, it is used by the different social agents to present biased proposals or conceptions of television.

The purpose of this article is to present certain elements that, modestly stated, may contribute to clarifying, situating or contextualising some of the positions and discourses maintained on the issue of reforming the television system and, in particular, television quality. In effect, there is no knowledge, social discourse or proposal that can be constructed in a void without previous referents or models, nor, therefore, are there discourses on television quality that are neutral either socially or scientifically. Rather, they inevitably involve a number of extraordinarily significant presuppositions about the nature of television, its functions in a democratic society and the type of relationship that it sets up with the viewers. Hence, what is presented herein on “television quality” can be read as a hermeneutic invitation to arousing the world, given as necessarily implicit in the positions and arguments maintained in our immediate context today where television and its overhauling are concerned.
**Subjects and objects of television quality**

The principal elements that enable us to grasp the diversity of ideas on quality that coexist in a particular social context are introduced in this first part of the article in the light of the profusion of interlocutors and ambits of reference for any discourse on television quality.

A first objective is to identify the interlocutors, and it is relevant at this juncture to identify both the subjects that have a more or less structured discourse on television quality and those that are not present where it is concerned. In the same way, it is important to identify what is discussed as well as what is not, and then cross-references both types of data.

One of the concepts that enable us to understand and impose a certain order on the profusion of discourses on television quality is the concept of *habitus*, which is often used in the sphere of the sociology of the professions to account for particular tendencies or visions of the world, the result of a specific professional socialisation termed “third degree” (the first and second degrees being the family and the school, respectively).

Bourdieu re-fashions the concept of *habitus*, specifying that certain homogeneous conditions of existence impose certain homogeneous conditioning factors that are suitable for engendering similar practices and specifying that they have a set of common properties, objectivised properties, which are often juridically guaranteed (like the possession of goods, rights, or titles) or incorporated, like the *habitus* of class (and, in particular, the systems of classifying *schema*).

“By designating these classes (classes of agents or what, according to this point of view, is the same, i.e. classes of conditions of existence) via the name of a profession, no more is done than manifesting that position in production relationships imposes certain practices, especially by means of the mechanisms that rule the access to the different positions and which produce or select a particular class of *habitus*”. (1)

Professional *habitus* is the kind that has most weight in shaping the matrices that structure the acquisition of knowledge and the exercise of particular practices, without falling into an ingenuous professional determinism. The notion of professional *habitus* explains the coincidence between the different notions of “television quality” in the different European countries, the United States, Japan or Canada, depending on the profession exercised. Expressed in other terms, the basis of “television quality” for programmers in different countries is much more similar, country to country, than the criteria of the programmers, scriptwriters and viewers in one and the same country. In other words, differences in the notions of “television quality” are not explained by geographical origin but by the professional ambit of those who formulate it. The notion of professional *habitus* enables us to account for the mechanisms of production and reproduction through the different geographical ambits, depending on the positions objectively
occupied in the TV market and the subjective interests and particularities of each individual. Thus, in a word, it is possible to identify the following notions of television quality depending on professional *habitus*:

- Politicians tend to define television quality in terms of any production that in some way contributes to national, linguistic or some community of reference construction, or, in the more common cases, the content of television quality is linked with some territorial referent;

- Programmers and directors of television channels identify television quality primarily in terms of profitability, audience success, or impact. This fact, although it may be considered logical on the part of management experts in the private television sector, is significant when expressed by public service television managers;

- Professionals working on the elaboration of programmes abide by notions of television quality depending on their own speciality. Thus, the more technical professionals, as is the particular case of editors, directors and some producers, appeal to a more technical conception of quality, in terms of formal characteristics of television expression such as montage, shots, lighting, music, and so on; on the other hand, scriptwriters, analysts and theoreticians of television language interpret quality in terms of programme structure, the building of characters, plot, and so on;

- Based on the comparatively few studies undertaken into their conception of quality, the audience distinguishes quality from its appreciation of the programmes and applies stricter criteria to its evaluation of quality. In other words, it distinguishes perfectly clearly between what it likes and what it considers to be quality, something that channel programmers do not usually distinguish in the discourse. Moreover, viewers link quality with the seriousness of the programme (that is, information genres), to the degree that, in one word, they consider quality to be a variable dependent on the genre.

As regards the object of the discourse on television quality, the analysis undertaken enables us to identify four major thematic areas of reference: the television system, programming in global terms, television channels and television programmes. Despite everything, in public discourse the first three areas pass relatively unnoticed and a large part of the discourse focuses on the quality of television programmes or its negation under the heading of “junk” TV.

The predominance of the discourse on the quality of television programmes is partly logical, given the fact that the programmes are the most visible part of television activity and the part that for reasons of immediacy is the easiest to tackle, but on the lips of politicians and those bodies or institutions that have power over the deciding and defining of television standards it becomes a pantomime that masks the decision-making process in the ambit that is most natural to them.
Despite the cross-referencing – and interference – from the different professionals involved in one way or another in television and the discourses that delegate the undertaking of television quality to other ambits, it is possible to identify a substantive content with regard to quality in each one of them.

1. Television system quality

By television system we interpret the whole set of regulations, traditions and political culture, existing channels, business groups, advertising sector, audience structure, etc., which define a particular television panorama. In this sense we often talk of the quality of the television system without defining any specific content; rather, the agents and/or the institutions responsible for undertaking it are identified.

In these discourses reference is made to the quality of a television system as the result of specific structural conditions; we talk mainly of legislative and financial conditions (external to the channels) and production conditions (internal to the channels). Quality appears almost as the natural result of the application of particular policies and this takes in both neo-liberal stances – as in the significant case of Thatcher’s Conservative Cabinet and the report on television reform entitled *Competition, Choice and Quality*, where the quality would “emanate” naturally once a system of maximum competition among the channels could be guaranteed – as well as positions closer to the philosophy of the Welfare State which defend the setting up of minimal structural conditions from which quality would also emerge: qualitative audience indicators, quota systems, production subsidies, encouragement for independent production, etc.

Notions of quality coded in internal policy are frequent in this ambit. Here, quality is equated with programming on the nation-wide or regional scales or programming that contributes to shaping and structuring communities within the region or reinforcing their political system. In this ambit, and for a particular context, notions of television quality are again presented that oppose one another depending on what the agents consider to be national or internal to the region.

In the ambit of the quality of the television system there also exist references to quality in economic terms; from this point of view, quality is defined as synonymous with profitability, competitiveness or the creation of wealth. These discourses define it depending on the accomplishment of specific cultural functions with references to education, learning or training.

2. Programming quality
The second ambit of reference for television quality is “programming quality”, where the discourses that make reference to the quality of the television programming as a whole that exists within a particular system can be inserted. References to quality in political terms (programming that involves itself in the construction of national identity or the enriching of the social fabric) are also present in this ambit and reference to diversity as an evaluating element in programming quality is becoming increasingly frequent.

As a factor, diversity becomes indisputable, it generates consensus everywhere and it is one of the politically correct factors present when discussing television quality. Having said this, it is worth underlining that the diversity factor is not one that indicates specific contents or specific production or programming policies other than an opening of the doors to the widest variety possible. Diversity, like pluralism in the ethical field, does not resolve the problem of the identification of “quality”. In this sense, the diversity factor has ample possibilities for establishing itself in the debate as a content factor of “television quality”; in fact, there are many authors that equate them, given that it is a factor that necessarily generates consensus and does not impose limitations.

The option for diversity sometimes appears expressed with little conviction and little detail regarding its substantive content; rather, as a remedy in the face of the lack of consensus about the ultimate aims of television’s activity. In this sense, the demand for diversity would be the same, in practice, as the notion of ethical relativism, in which any content whatever is defendable in the name of diversity of taste or public, etc. Thus Mulgan, for instance, adds to his list on quality the idea that “diversity is a value that is widely accepted because of the impossibility of fixing a centre, a hard core of values or a group with the ability to impose its values and overall vision. On a more philosophical level, diversity is also defended as an essential value in a world de-centralised of multiple truths (or rather, of multiple fictions) where the centripetal forces acting for common perspectives must be avoided at all cost”. (2)

Accordingly, defining diversity, or which diversity is defined, is in no case a neutral exercise. Diversity of what? Diversity of political parties that intervene in the definition of television regulation and management? Diversity of content? Diversity of audience? Of opinion? And beyond this, yet in a fundamental and inescapable way, diversity to what extent? Can limits be placed on this diversity? Depending on what? Who imposes these limits?

2.1 Ambits of reference for programming quality

The different ambits in which this programming diversity is applied are sometimes specified: system diversity, for instance, with reference to the existence of public and private channels, or to refer to the co-existence of televisions ruled by a majority system and others ruled by a pluralist system, or alluding to the existence of television channels with differing aims or addressed to different sectors of the public.
The discourse on “television diversity” as a measure of “programming quality” is dominated by three large areas of reference:

1. Diversity interpreted from the market, as a measure of the quality of television programming
2. Diversity measured via the audience, as a measure of the quality of television programming
3. Diversity as an internal criterion, in other words via reference to the programmes, as a measure of the quality of television programming.

Each of these areas involves different presuppositions and implicit notions for the global function of television and perspectives for its study. It should be underlined that studies of the diversity of the television sector undertaken from the economic standpoint, with an approach similar to that of the studies undertaken in other sectors involving goods and services, analyse the market capacity and the repercussion that the entry of new competitors will have on consumption. From this discourse standpoint, quality is conceived as an economic optimum.

This approach responds to the specific interest of a series of agents, like the business and political sectors, which may have an interest in knowing characteristics like the habits of the viewing public and its demand for diversity according to time slots, types of programmes, the degree of profitability that the introduction of new television channels will have, the anticipation of the expansion or contraction of the advertising market depending on the number of stations, the effect of recession on production investment, etc. Many studies of this nature have been undertaken in terms of the quality of the global system, quality therefore being understood from the economic efficiency standpoint.

Diversity measured in audience terms or in terms of social diversity as a measure of television programming makes reference to an evaluation of diversity in terms of groups and/or social collectives and how they are present and represented in programming, and to the relationship between diversity of content and diversity of social themes. It represents an evaluation of diversity focused on the relationship between the audience, themes and television content.

2.2 Controversies surrounding the value of diversity

We now address a couple of points involving the studies undertaken of television programming quality that develop the concept of diversity as a synonym of that quality that underscore the risks run by any imposition of a factor such as diversity if the interpretation of the latter is left in the hands of economic analyses.
In the first place, the basic presupposition of the linking of programming quality in research into diversity from the market point of view is that an increase in the number of channels has a repercussion on an increase in the number of different programmes, a fact that then has repercussions on an increase in freedom of choice on the part of the viewers.

The concept of programming diversity is re-elaborated throughout the research and soon the idea that the larger the number of channels, the greater the viewers’ freedom of choice, is contradicted. In effect, the study by Noll, Peck and McGowan that defines diversity via the quantity of options, the diversity of the types of programmes and the programme’s tone, shows that the entry of a new television channel does not automatically guarantee a greater diversity in programming because of the tendency on the part of the advertising sector to benefit the channels that apply a programming policy consisting of re-runs of successful programmes instead of experimenting with new programme formats. (3)

Later studies, collected by Litman, (4) identify the advertising sector as the one mainly responsible for the homogenisation of contents in network programming. (5) Since then, diversity is considered to be functionally related to market structure, especially with the existence and degree of competition and the technological factors that affect the number of channels available and the method of financing.

Another example of studies of system diversity that is explicitly related to programming quality is the study that discovers the “programming cycles” where, over the years, channels copy successful formats to the nth degree. These cycles follow identifiable periods such as programme innovation, imitation and finally saturation. This stereotyped programming is the natural enemy of experimentation and innovation, and therefore of diversity (6) and television quality.

A second note makes reference to the setting up of limits on diversity that even from the most neo-liberal currents that support a total liberalisation of the television market and the privatisation of public television bodies advocate the necessary existence of limits on diversity. This is an economic interpretation of diversity that equates it with market efficiency and displays a tendency to mistake the political and social aims of television for the business purposes of television institutions.

The reflections made by authors such as Bettettini and Fumagalli, Sartori or Finkielkraut must be incorporated into the debate in order to finalise the question of the limits on programming diversity, interpreted not from an economic but from an ethical point of view. They rebel against the demagoguery, taken to an extreme, of the diversity factor and the need to impose limits on it so that other values, considered to be even more basic, are not impaired.

It should also be added that the discourse on diversity is often imposed from the lips of interlocutors of different and contrary tendencies as a substantive proclamation of television quality, when it is often a matter of a simple publicity slogan. In this sense, the introduction of new forms of distribution of television
signals such as cable and satellite, which have the inevitable effect of splitting up the audience with the re-
emergence of “diversity” as a factor with which everyone is in agreement, cannot be considered a simple,
ingenuous “coincidence”. We should therefore ask ourselves about the coincidence in the denouncing of
normative evaluations of quality branded as “insufferable paternalism”, ranging from neo-liberal attitudes
like that of Rupert Murdoch to currents that are apparently more in favour of openness to representing
social diversity.

3. Television channel quality

The discourse on “television channel quality” distinguishes between two main types of quality assessment.
On the one hand, there are a series of discourses for defining television channel quality that employ
standards of measurement that are external to the channel itself and these restrict the accomplishment of
quality depending on the accomplishment of their mandate or their statutory mission or depending on the
contribution that the channel makes to global programming quality measured in terms of diversity. In this
latter case, the analysis of a whole series of studies and measures for assessing the contribution made to
global programming diversity by each of the channels that operate in a region makes interesting study.

Other discourses define television channel diversity depending on its capacity to define its own editorial
policy or create an identity differentiated from the rest of the channels. These criteria make reference to
the consciousness of the presence of the viewing public as an element that confers quality on the
channels, which then involves patience in the scheduling of new programmes so that the public will
become accustomed to them, and respect for the confidence that the public places in the channel or the
non-linear nature of the programming. Another criterion that appears often and repeatedly in contexts of a
more global extent (such as European audio-visual policy in relation to American programmes) is the
balance between domestic and foreign programming, one that has often derived into the establishing of
programming quotas as an element to guarantee television quality.

In addition, there are a series of discourses that employ internal assessment criteria in the channel in
order to define television quality. In these cases the degree of freedom existing within the television
channels or the professional standing of their workers is referred to.

4. Television programme quality

Finally, television quality makes reference to the “television programme quality”, which is the most
concrete ambit of reference and the one in which more specific quality standards and indicators are
developed.
On the one hand, a series of discourses that employ elements of assessment that are external to the programmes can be identified. This is the case of the evaluation of programmes based on the attribution of certain functions, normally according to genre, and of the fulfilling of these functions. The clearest case is that of news programmes where quality is a measure of the extent to which the programme provides news and a whole series of measurements of objectivity, impartiality or news provision are deployed.

In other cases, assessments of programmes are carried out based on a series of external disciplines such as economics, for example, which give rise to programme quality assessment in terms of profitability, competitiveness or business success. Other external assessments of programme quality are made from the ethical standpoint, which gives rise to programme quality assessments in terms of the approximation they set up with the viewer. Value is also attached to the stimulus that this supposes for reflection, respect, the type of consumption, etc. or the ecstatic stimulus, which defines television programme quality in terms of the reception act and the effect that such programmes have on the viewer.

On the other hand, there are discourses on the quality of television programmes that define quality on the basis of elements internal to the medium itself; these are elements that explicitly or implicitly claim for the setting up of assessment criteria internal to the television medium that reject the assessment of television products in the light of criteria developed in other disciplines such as literature, painting or even the cinema. In this sense, the fact that television has to set up and defend its own standards of assessment is claimed for, given that television can never satisfy literary or cinematic assessment standards, as this is not its nature as a medium, nor does it operate in the same context.

In this claim for assessment criteria proper to the medium itself it is possible to identify a series of discourses that define quality depending on the content (whether based on the treatment of particular themes, types of content or types of approximation to the content); others that define programme quality in terms of “form”, whether in terms of its “writing” (with references to its internal structure, its characters, the relationship between plots, etc.) or in terms of its “technical qualities” (with references to lighting, shots, montage, etc.). Other discourses define programme quality depending on the inter-relationship between form and content.

In the assessment of television programmes based on criteria generated within the medium itself, the references to television genre are recurrent. In this sense, no mention is made of the same criteria of quality assessment when it is a matter of a news broadcast as when mention is made of a serial, or a quiz programme. Despite the fact that theoretically (as different authors recognise) the diverse concepts generated in the analysis of quality can be applied to the different television genres (news programmes and entertainment programmes), they attribute different functions to television programmes in accordance with the genre and its quality comes to depend on the fulfilment of these functions. Thus, for example, political functions are attributed to news broadcasting and quality is measured depending on the level of
information content or objectivity with respect to reality. Ritual functions and pleasure are attributed to the entertainment genre, especially televised fiction, which remit to quality assessments from the aesthetic perspective, which then enables us to develop quality assessment via an analysis of internal elements such as their structure, content, form or the inter-relationship between form and content. The consideration of one genre or another remits to differentiated methods of analysis and, therefore, to differentiated discursive constructs in terms of quality.

**Television quality and the methodology of analysis**

From the theoretical point of view, the discourse on “television quality” is one that is extraordinarily dependent on methods of approach and the perspectives employed for its definition. Thus, it is possible to distinguish between four main historical dimensions in the concept of “television quality” that respond to four main objects of study linked with television:

- A conception of quality in normative terms. This conception corresponds, in one word, to an early stage in television studies, although some of its referents can still be encountered today. From this perspective, the analysis of the mode of television production, particularly production in series and the standardisation of programmes, has led to a widespread discrediting of the medium and the negation of any possibility of creating quality products. The recurring debate in the ambit of Culture between “conformists and non-conformists” is reproduced in the case of television and it is the mode of production (which involves the dissolution of the concept of authorship and the uniqueness of creative work), and no other factor, that is used to deny quality to television.

- A functionalist conception of television quality. In these cases the relationship between the television medium or the programmes and the fulfilling of certain social and/or economic objectives (public interest or efficiency) is analysed. Quality then becomes the result of the fulfilment of the aims (discourses of the type: “it represents quality if it fulfils the informative function, or certain audience ratings”, etc.).

- An aesthetic conception of quality, based on the analysis of the television language used in programmes, in terms of structure, the tension between innovation and reception, etc.

- An ecstatic conception of quality that utilises ethnographic methods and analysis of reception to validate the achievement or not of television programme quality. In this latter case these are subjective notions of quality, where the impression made on the viewer is the measure of
quality (the fact of leaning something new, enjoying different experiences, excitement at some content or its treatment, etc.).

Logbook

Although the research undertaken into the content of television quality enables us to identify substantive contents for each of the ambits of reference (television system quality, programming quality, channel quality and television programme quality), the attempt at regulation or reform of the audio-visual world proves, in our opinion, to be ingenuous if it approaches the task in hand, the definition of standards or specific policies for establishing television quality as if it was an issue of closed, sterile levels. It is in this sense that “television quality” is spoken of as a “project” in which a wide range of agents and ambits is involved.

In practice, it implies that the mutual delegation of responsibilities in the realization of “television quality” between professionals (ranging from politicians, channel managers, programmers and TV professionals themselves) and institutions (Parliament and the organs of control and/or audio-visual authorities) flagrantly eludes the exercise of responsibility in the ambit itself. Yet it also implies that even with the best will in the world on the part of the different professionals and institutions involved in each one of the ambits of responsibility for making “television quality” effective, it will still be difficult to achieve visible and permanent results without the participation of the remaining sectors involved.

NOTES

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Litman brings together similar studies undertaken with other media such as the cinema, in which a positive correlation between market concentration and the concentration of cinematic genres is found, confirming the hypothesis of the impact of economic factors on programme content. In the case of the record industry it can be shown that the degree of diversity of musical forms is inversely related to the degree of concentration of the market, and in the case of the diversity of the video market it can be shown that the more concentrated the industry is, the more conventional the products are, whereas greater competition among the industries is more permeable to contents originating from independent sources.

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