

# Post-television: from anthropological TV to the digital society

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- *'Post-television' is a term suggested by the book "La Post-televisión" (publisher, Icaria), edited by Ignacio Ramonet and including the participation of Jöel de Rosnay, Armand Mattelart, Bruno Giussani, Jean-Claude Guédon, Paul Virilio, Asdrad Torres, Francis Pisani, Philippe Breton, Philippe Quéau, Régis Debray and Herbert I. Schiller. I used the term to try to build on an area of television analysis, although it was used in the article entitled, "Un cambio de era", by Jöel de Rosnay, director of the Cite des Sciences et de l'Industrie in Paris.*

Since the 1920s, when the BBC first broadcast in 1927, television in Europe has been defined from a public conception that bases its legitimacy, its reason for being, on the public service ideal. Public television in Europe was built on the legacy of this service and perpetuated as an immutable value and reference point. The scope of this public service, still present today and characterising our public television stations, is as follows:

**a)** Television as a mechanism for building the State, i.e., an element of social cohesion, based on the ethical imperative that the State should promote and consolidate universal access to information. In short, a type of public television with quite a broad mandate, involving different areas, such as education, training, entertainment and quality.

**b)** Public television as a guardian of pluralism. This basically refers to informative and political pluralism to

ensure the presence of different social and political parties in search of a political fair play that ensures a certain balance of representation. This aspect has always constituted a permanent source of tension between the government, opposition parties and journalists, who want to preserve their independence.

**c)** Public television as a cultural instrument. Europe's public television was originally conceived as an essentially cultural organisation that would be responsible for generating and promoting linguistic wealth, aesthetics and the defence of the specific culture of each country.

**d)** Public television as a non-commercial reality. Although it may seem contradictory, public television stations defend their legitimacy on not being commercial, when in practice (both in programming and funding sources) they are. However, it is important to mention this declaration of principles of not calling themselves commercial and positioning themselves closer to society than the market, something which shows us the tension within public television between theoretical formulation and reality.

Looking at these four points, we could say that public television, from its origins through to today, has been subjected to a double dynamic, in the form of principles and power. We could also say that the European society we live in today has been built on controlling what is public in the communications sector, which has developed the idea in the collective imagination that television has to be a defence mechanism against market dynamics and a tool of national cohesion in social, cultural and political aspects.

Public television in Europe has not moved on much since the early days and in some ways has radicalised its position on the basis of fears about deregulation of the television and telecommunications markets and projected onto public opinion the idea that we need public television for our society to be fair, equal and plural.

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Therefore, when we talk about a first defence of public television, we are talking about defending a type of television connected to a romantic idealism of a cultural basis, a perpetuation of traditional notions of power relationships with the media and a profound prejudice in relation to deregulation of the television market which considers that an open form of communication compromises education, culture, language and information.

We could even say that the current model of public television, and to some extent some private television, too, has a markedly *anthropological* nature, although I do not share the negative definition that José María Calviño (director-general of TVE from 1982 to 1986) gave for the term 'anthropological'. It is a type of television where functions focus on public service, on the basis of favouring power structures, customs, traditions, language and identity and establishing relationships based on forging a collective identity among viewers. It is a type of television which, if we look at evolutions in technology (digitalisation), markets (deregulation), politics (greater democratic culture), culture (post-national culture) and society (new identity/project), conforms to the idea of protecting more than participating in the changes under way. In most cases, public television becomes a television/area of resistance against the transformations being produced and which affect the functions of television overall and thus its organs of decision-making.

The history of television in Spain has been marked by forty years of dictatorship, which, from the first regular TVE broadcasts in 1956, saw public television become a propaganda tool for the political regime. This fact accentuated the instrumental nature of public television and favoured a type of programming that was directly related to political necessity. The appearance of the Autonomous Community television stations in the 1980s meant that authority in the television sector for a number of years fell to the public sector, emphasising the nature of a closed communication model limited to the requirements of political organisations. On balance, we can say that the appearance of the regional television stations led to a fight for the public space, a fight between a radial model and a reticulated one, which also had its expression in the appearance of private television. The regional television stations (mainly TVC, which began broadcasting in 1983, and EITB, which began

in 1982) have tried to some extent to recover the public space that had been lost for years in favour of languages, political visions and cultures that had been censored and questioned by the public television of the regime. The construction of the communication space in Spain was therefore based on the creation of a large network of public television stations (FORTA plus TVE) based on the principles that inspired public television throughout Europe, but with a greater political burden, which fought not only for the audience but also the type of society to be built. The result of this dispute was that culture has to some extent been constructed from television to benefit television.

The appearance of private television in 1990 was determined by the influence of the model of public television in Spain. In fact, private television was defined as public-service television in the Act on private television stations. This definition saw private television networks (particularly Antena 3 TV) use operating models that mimetically reproduced the public one. In the early years, private television's only contribution was therefore to fight for the existing audience rather than create a new one. This led to private television stations with public characteristics and public television stations with private characteristics.

It was a model of private television designed more in the interest of privatising than deregulating the television market. Deregulation, had it occurred, would not only have provided a greater television offer but also an overflow of public services and should have sped up the creation of a communications system more concerned for its future than its immediate present and more worried about competing for an audience than dividing it up. This situation led to television in Spain being more concerned with preserving the *status quo* that had been established since 1983 than in forging progress in the new models of communication arising from digitalisation.

With the exception of satellite digital television, i.e., Canal Satélite Digital and Vía Digital, we can see that, while people's daily lives are already digital (in their use of GPS technologies, mobile telephones, CD-ROMs, compact disks, the Internet, etc.), the television they consume is still inspired in most ways by the television model proposed from the public sphere and produced from an analogical conception. We are therefore faced with a digital society that consumes a type of television that programmes a reality of

a closed conception, which continues in a certain way to protect the programming that viewers watch in its desire to continue to construct reality.

Digitalisation, which puts images, sound and data into relation and allows a direct and real-time relationship with viewers through a return channel, proposes a type of communication where the audience become users and where a multiplication of offers involves moving from the general to the specific. It is a technology whose technical aspects propose a new approach towards traditional, anthropological television, whereby collective identity is subjected to individual identity, rather than the other way around as now. It will therefore be the viewer-cum-user who, from his or her needs and desires, will use television to construct their own reality. Both the public and private television we watch today is devoted to building the viewer's point of view rather than mediating between the viewer and what is happening onscreen.

The move from anthropological television to the digital society involves a certain acceptance that we are close to the post-television era, which will be marked by:

- a) Deregulation of the television sector and therefore market liberalisation.
- b) The multiplication of television offers.
- c) Interactivity.
- d) Technological convergence and thus global communication.
- e) The entry of new business players – the publishing world, telecommunications, etc.
- f) The loss of the national character of the media.
- g) The reformulation of public services, increasingly based on a supply of services rather than a supply of content.
- h) A privatisation of public services: traffic and weather information and other essential services.
- i) Increasingly specialised channels.
- j) Communication based on choice, not imposition.
- k) An evolution from replacement technologies (such as the fax, which replaced the telex) towards integration technologies (such as the personal computer).

These are some elements of what we could call post-television, which is arising from digitalisation and which will propose a new way of creating, producing, broadcasting and viewing information and other television content. This new television proposal will involve the disappearance of

public and private television as we know them, to be replaced by a new formulation of functions involving public television (focusing more on the public services associated with television and aimed at all publics) and private television (increasingly associated with offers aimed at viewer-users). This evolution/hypothesis establishes a communications system that will be dominated by private supply and complemented by public supply, not the other way around, as has been the case until now.

Aspects such as identity, language and the reinforcement of cultural, political and informational plurality will continue to drive public television but they will not be targets so much as ways of relating with the public. Viewers will become the target to be met. Public television will change from constructing reality to being constructed by reality. People and their needs will be responsible for proposing the bases and points of the contract-programme with television stations. One example of this new communicational dynamic, where States will have to focus their attention to reformulate public television, is the concept of *global information infrastructure* as proposed by the Clinton Administration, which aimed to guarantee a universal service accessible to all members of society and which could enable the creation of networks that people can participate in more directly.

In short, the public and private television stations that are currently unidirectional will have to reformulate their functions based on a new type of television/communication that arises from networks that break down hierarchies and redistribute the power of communication.

The digital society involves the start of a new world order in the area of communications that will bring new challenges that involve rethinking television and its functions. In other words, we will have to go back to asking ourselves what television is.