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THE INSTITUTIONAL ASPECTS OF TELEVISION

A SURVEY

by Francis BALLE

In 1957 the launching of the first sputnik ushered in a new era for television. Communications satellites conquered space; through them television broke out of narrow national confines. 1964: Shortly after the Olympic Games had been re-transmitted by Telstar, a further revolution was announced: video-cassettes. The new medium, using techniques which still varied widely, made it possible for the masses to record and reproduce television pictures.

Throughout the sixties, satellites and video-cassettes inspired alternatively the most pathetic fears and the most extravagant hopes. The optimists proclaimed the advent of television "à la carte" which would moreover, be world-wide. The pessimists ranked the latest improvements among the suspect adjuncts of a technocratic society. Events did not corroborate either view, for the promised revolution never occurred.

In the early seventies it was cable television's turn to generate further debate and new hopes. But already it was being said that "true" cable television had two special features: it enabled the distributor to transmit to subscribers other programmes than those received over the air in the area he served; and it permitted the transmission of original programmes produced on the spot or recorded on cassettes. Only on these two conditions would cable television come of age and cease to be simply an extension of collective aerials.

1975 has brought the age of disillusionment. Not merely is world-wide macro-television hampered by the divisions of international society, but the introduction of the other sort of television, micro-television - which in both senses is closer to viewers - is also postponed from year to year.

Everyone agrees what the problem is, even if they use different terms: the "software" is lagging behind the "hardware". What is the good of all these technical acrobatics? Or more precisely, when we think everything is possible, what do we actually do?

Obviously the question is one of ends, not means. What is needed is not to list the endless technical possibilities so much as to ask what uses our societies are prepared to make of them. For it is certain that our future depends largely on society's ability to master them.

The problem of modern communications is therefore above all sociological. It is not enough to consider in turn the potential of new techniques and the mainsprings of collective organisation; the constant interaction of the new media and the various agents in society - individuals and groups - must be scrutinised from every angle. In this sense, audio-visual institutions, with their equipment, their staff - some of them professionsals, others less so -

and their various regulations, betray the desire of the community
in the double sense of revealing it and disappointing it. At thi
precise point, forecasting comes into its own: awareness of the
future is born.

I.   THE DISAPPOINTMENTS OF CABLE TELEVISION

1972 marked a turning point in recent French television history.
Until then, cable television had been regarded simply as an extension
of collective aerials: its interest seemed to lie in better
reception of conventional television. The installation of cables
therefore encountered the two monopolies of the Post Office and the
ORTF (Office de radiodiffusion - télévision française). However,
industrialists were not indifferent to the new technique: for
several years, companies such as Thomson-CSF Philips, Visiodis,
Intec and, more recently, the Multivision group had been interested.
Other smaller firms - Portenseigne, Soditel, Rediffusion, Pizon-Bros,
etc - had also begun to develop specialist equipment.

So experiments with cable television began at that time, thanks
to the initiative of certain local authorities and building
promoters. In 1972, an estimated 350 networks were installed.
However, their situation differed greatly. Only 14 were officially
authorised: each served 95 homes on average. These networks were
installed in the shadow of hertzian waves or in frontier regions.
Some of them receive Swiss, German or Luxembourg programmes. Sixty-
five networks are operating without ever having received the licence
applied for: they each served about 110 homes. Lastly, 230 pirate
networks of the same size are functioning without ever having
applied for a licence. At the end of 1972 no less than 119
installations were being built or were planned, including some as
part of the new towns or urban renewal schemes at Créteil,
Cergy-Pontoise, Grenoble-Echirolles, Chamonix, Rennes, Colmar and
Nice.

The adoption by parliament on 3 July 1972 of a new charter
for the ORTF, as a first step towards greater pluralism and
sharper competition between the three national channels, brought
cable television's existence and second-generation promises to the
notice of the French general public. This late awareness coincided
with conventional television's reachings its years of discretion.

After appointing its new board of directors, the ORTF asked
Mr Maurice Bujon, editor of "Midi Libre", to draw up a report on
the problems of cable television. This report was submitted on
28 November 1972. In it Mr Bujon expressed the view, on the one
hand, that cable television should not be developed hastily or
conform to a single pattern, while on the other hand, he hoped
that the press would be given an extensive part in this new
television venture. Hence, for reasons of principle as much as
for financial reasons, the ORTF should not take sole responsibility
for cable television. Its function, the report went on, should be

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"on the one hand to take part in studies and experiments and on the other to uphold its mission in culture and information". The regional press, including local periodicals, to which parliament and the government had just granted the privileges of daily newspapers, was therefore invited to play a major role in the setting up of cable television companies.

Yet there was little change in the legal arrangements. The principle of monopoly was clearly upheld. The Act of 3 July 1972 confirmed the monopolistic functions of the ORTF under the authority of the Prime Minister or of a member of the government appointed by him. According to Article 3, however, "exceptions may be allowed, on conditions determined by decree ... for the broadcasting of programmes to specified publics ...; for the closed-circuit broadcasting of programmes on private premises for scientific research experiments in the interests of national defence or public security".

Two advisory bodies were also set up by the act. A parliamentary delegation was available for consultation at any time by the government or the ORTF, in particular on exceptions to the monopoly, the establishment of public bodies subject to the ORTF and the rules governing agreements entered into by the ORTF or such bodies with outside organisations concerning the production, broadcasting or re-transmission of programmes.

Private initiatives were not lacking: Multivideo, SODETE, Codecables, Gifatel and others.

Attention was, however, focussed on the "Société Française de Télédistribution" set up on 2 March 1972, following agreement between the ORTF and the Post Office. Its role was to assess the public's needs in this sphere and study the technical, economic and legal problems of cable television.

In July 1973 the Prime Minister, Pierre Messmer, authorised seven experiments, at Chamonix, Cergy-Pontoise, Créteil, Grenoble, Metz, Nice and Rennes. The SFT was given the task of piloting them.

In its first report, published in August 1974, the SFT set out in as concrete terms as possible the technical, economic and legal requirements of any cable broadcasting network, but at the same time stressed the remaining uncertainties. These mainly concerned four spheres where action was considered crucial for the future: the ethics of audio-visual communication, the rules on importing programmes from peripheral stations, the rules on advertising and the conditions governing exceptions to the monopoly.

1974 was the year of the first great disappointments. This disenchantment was due above all to the limits very soon encountered in the de-professionalisation of audio-visual communications that

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had been so loudly trumpeted two years earlier, first of all
beyond the Atlantic and then in Europe. American "free access"
and Canadian community television still bore the mark - the press
now took pleasure in printing this out mercilessly - of amateurism
and an obsession with marginal subjects. It began to seem, as the
experts remarked, that cable television would be used to relay
conventional programmes more than to draw attention to local
initiative and community development. In the words of Jean Cazeneuve,
the production of local programmes tended "towards either sponsored
entertainment or protest monologue or mime by a few fringe groups".

In 1975 the pendulum is still swinging towards pessimism. The
limelight has been stolen by the establishment of the seven
companies that are to succeed the ORTF, and the experiments
launched by the Messmer Government seem to be ending in failure
more often than success.

Six half-failures and one half-success

In July 1975 Rennes, true to its original mission; is still
at the experimental stage. One of the aims of the "Centre Commun
d'Etudes de Télévision et de Télé-communications" set up by the
joint effort of the ORTF and the Post Office and opened in
September 1972, is in fact to consider the technical possibilities
of cable broadcasting: pay television like the SFT, home journals
instant programmes on request to the control room, etc. But the
transition to the operational stage is up against the peculiar
caution of each of the promoters of the present network: Ouest-
France is consolidating its position in micro-information, Rennes
City Council is playing safe with the 1977 elections in view and
SFT, following the break-up of the ORTF, is waiting for financial
backers,

At Nice all the preliminary engineering plans are ready:
they provide that viewers should have the choice of the three
French channels, Télé Monte-Carlo, the two channels of the RAI,
a local programme and 6 FM radio stations. There is the same
caution as at Rennes, but Nice-Matin (whose circulation in 1974
was 226,000 copies) does not possess the financial resources of
Ouest-France (circulation 620,000). The city of Nice will perhaps
be forced to provide more than 50% of the capital for the company.

Metz is even less far advanced than Nice on the road to cable
broadcasting. The experts are at present considering the technical
possibilities and potential markets for a cable broadcasting
system. Metz has however one crucial asset: the development of
new districts around the old city.

Chamonix today is an example of the unforeseen difficulties in
establishing a network. Situated at the bottom of a valley close t
Italian and to French-Swiss stations, the network has to meet the
disparate demands of two markets: the local inhabitants, who
number almost 10,000, and the tourists, who represent a potential
audience of more than 80,000. Thus what is striking about this
station today is the crucial question of programmes, not organisati
and finance.

Cergy-Pontoise and Créteil present the same characteristics
where cable broadcasting is concerned: a new town with a populatio
inclined to participation in society, predominantly young and
"middle class". 8,000 dwellings are connected up at Cergy and more
than 3,000 in Créteil new town. Another essential similarity is the
firm resolve in both cases to give prominence to residents' efforts
and community development. The mayor of Créteil, Mr Pierre Billott
announced in January 1973 his intention to link up 6,000 homes in
1974 and to double the number of subscribers this year. In Cergy
private and public initiatives in the field of community video
seemed to promise rapid development in community television. In
both cases hopes were soon dashed. Créteil town council has
regularly postponed the extension of the network to the old town
and adjacent "communes". Furthermore, for lack of funds it has
not renewed for 1975 the contract of the television producer engage
two years earlier to build up a real local television service. At
Cergy-Pontoise other difficulties are leading to the same result.
The experiment in community television has been suspended because
the town's "Syndicat d'Aménagement Communautaire" (Community Planni
Association) has refused until now to provide the 300,000 FF for t
operational budget for the next three years. Moreover, cable
broadcasting and community video both seem in this particular case,
to be waiting for the other to take the first step, and this makes
stagnation worse. Lastly, the prospects offered by community
development are coveted by different groups, many of which are in
rivalry and some of which are mutually exclusive.

There remains the experiment in Grenoble. This serves as an
example, in that it demonstrates the need for previous community
development if television is to be really local; and it also
provides a precedent, for the "Video-Gazette de Grenoble" was the
first televised journal in France to be produced in a municipal
context. From the outset the "Dauphiné Libéré" and the "Progrès
de Lyon" took part in the experiment. Introductory courses in vide
techniques, photography and sound-recording were organised towards
the end of 1972 and were soon quite successful. The "Video-Gazette"
which was at first projected on to a cinema screen, has been cabled
several evenings a week since January 1974. Nevertheless, the loca
channel is still broadcast only to the 2,200 homes in the Arlequin
district of Grenoble-Echirolles new town, and the video courses,
after being fully booked in the opening weeks, is no longer able
to attract new public. The same thing happened with the televised
local journal: initial enthusiasm was followed by a relatively
stagnant audience, or so those in charge of it say.

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The Grenoble experiment is still a useful example mainly because it shows what cable television represents, or is thought to represent, in various quarters: the Ministry of Cultural Affairs in Paris, the big national dailies, the regional monopoly daily papers and the various local associations, not forgetting the sundry warring factions on councils. This can be seen from the discussions about the constantly postponed establishment of a semi-public company for the new town.

II.   THE PRESENT POSITION AND GUIDELINES FOR THE FUTURE

1975 will go down in the history of French television as the year of disappointment with cable television. For a very long time this was regarded by a select minority as an opportunity for conventional television to renew itself, the beginning at last of a decentralised, diversified, active television. Even better, it was sometimes considered that the new television would mean the end of mass television, which of necessity made for uniformity and acted as an opiate. On this view the two kinds of television were in effect engaged in a struggle from which the champions of progress would inevitably emerge victorious. Hence the keenness of all factions and ideologies to appropriate the new technique or to find in it a further demonstration of their previous convictions.

Today some of the conditions seem to have been met for defining a few aims for audio-visual techniques and trying gradually to outline a sort of code of reference. Above all, the new boom in conventional television, coinciding with the disappointment with cable television and its relations, is tempting those in charge of the media to implement a comprehensive audio-visual policy. Without falling into the more naive belief in the complementary nature of the different broadcasting techniques, they now accept that it is impossible to treat separately the problems raised by the emergence of new communications technologies. What is more, governments seem determined to ward off hidden pressures and struggles for influence, solely in order to reconcile the virtues of competition among collectively organised interests with respect for the interests of the public.

Yet the prospects for French television in 1980-85 seem more unpredictable than inevitable. Moreover, the introduction of a new technology in a complex society is the result of a number of micro-decisions by social agents not all of whom occupy the front of the stage.

Consideration of the next decade, then, suggests a double approach. On the one hand we must look simultaneously at present trends in both the uses and the effects of audio-visual techniques and at the way in which French society proposes to use those techniques to serve its purposes; these trends will all determine, or at least influence - they cannot fail to influence - the implications of any overall communications policy. On the other hand we must try to ascertain some of the future possibilities on which tomorrow depends. We need not make firm decisions for the future, but we must define the conditions and circumstances in which such decisions will have to be taken.

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Audio-visual problems in 1975

1.   The various aspects of television's growth crisis are prominent
among the present factors determining audio-visual institutions,
their operation and their possible development.

It is true that television has reached years of discretion,
at least to the public mind. Its users' talk and behaviour are
marked neither by the fascination of the early years nor by the
satiety or lassitude of the following period. After a brusque
then "contained" expansion, television is entering a new era:
excessive denigration and unconditional praise are both limited by
general consensus. As Jean d'Arcy has put it so well, the televisio
of affluence seems to have become "demythified" by wear and tear.

Nevertheless, French television has been little spared by the
dual crisis which is affecting all the media on both sides of the
Atlantic. It is firstly a crisis of credibility: American
laissez-faire is as sharply challenged as the varying degrees of
intervention in European states. In recent months the charges have
become international: there is constant talk of obsession with
numbers, a levelling down of taste and television's harmful influenc
on children and on the cultural horizon of adults, although in
widely differing contexts. Then there is the crisis of legitimacy;
audio-visual institutions are challenged on all sides. Their
theoretical justification remains anchored in two principles which
prove contradictory in practice: the law of the market and confider
in the mechanism whereby supply and demand adjust to each other and,
over. Against this, the increasingly frequent and explicit mention
of the public's right to culture and information, which implies
increased state intervention.

2.   European states, with a degree of improvisation and with
certainly unequal success, are trying out institutional formulae
which sometimes betray the principles on which they claim to stand.
For a very long time the form of ownership was a favourite criterior
the distinction being drawn between "public" and "private" televisio
The former, under state control, was a vehicle for an independent
cultural policy but was in constant danger of becoming a formidable
force in the hands of those in power. The latter was the exact
opposite: it was quicker to provide full and objective information
but was suspected of a tendency to demogogy born of trying to win
over majorities rather than minorities. The European television
systems and their North American counterparts were, and often still
are, seen as incarnations of the two legal alternatives.

Today it has to be admitted that the demarcation line between
two types of institution has become very blurred. Both in the
United States and in Europe the institutions have undergone the
double test of reality and criticism. In the first place, televisio
bodies are not always as their zealots and their detractors see and
project them. More important, however, criticism on both sides of

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the Atlantic has done much to narrow the gap between institutions
which, it was supposed, followed diametrically opposed policies.
Denunciation of obsession with numbers and cultural demagogy on the
one hand and of state monopolies of information on the other started
this rapprochement. Without a doubt, the convergence is now one of
the essential characteristics of present-day broadcasting in the
western world.

Of course, the differences still outweigh the resemblances and
the reality is certainly more complex than our zeal to classify
would like. But what demonstrates the relative convergence of
virtually opposed systems is their equal attachment to principles
and ideals inherited from the 19th century and the last 20 years.

After long justifying public monopoly by the public interest,
Europeans are gradually coming to discover the virtues of competition.
Competition also means decentralisation and greater room for
initiative independent of the controlling authority. The background
to this is renewed confidence in market mechanisms: free choice for
the public, emulation among programme planners and a multiplicity
of sources and organs of information. After all, what is true for
the written press may also be true for broadcasting. The recent
history of European television shows this gradual move towards
greater pluralism and keen competition between programmes. In France,
the establishment of seven new companies in January 1975 marked the
culmination of the decentralising policy initiated in September 1969
by J Chaban-Delmas. This reform certainly constitutes a veritable
revolution. For the first time, competition between channels is
no longer feeble, suspect or illusory but has become keen, aggressive
or fierce. Nevertheless, it is still limited by conditions imposed
in the interests and in the name of the general public.

At the same time, the United States appears to be concerned to
counter-balance the excesses of competition. In the late fifties,
the major networks seemed to have won the battle for commercial
television. However, the crisis soon broke after being latent for
several months. The accusations are well-known. At the end of 1967
the report of the Carnegie Commission severely criticised commercial
television and urged the founding of another system backed by federal
funds. Some months later Congress passed a law setting up "National
Educational Television". On 5 November 1967, for the first time in
the United States, an information programme more than two hours long
was broadcast without any advertising break. Since then, while the
"fourth" network is developing with varying degrees of success, the
Federal Communications Commission is tightening its control over
"private" television stations.

Consequently it seems as if European television systems and
their North American forerunner are taking the same road in opposite
directions. Everywhere compromises have been or are about to be
found. What those in charge are seeking, with varying degrees of
clarity, is to combine the advantages which the two systems are
normally supposed to have while avoiding their disadvantages.

In fact it is mainly a question of permeating audio-visual
institutions with the ordinary rules of public service: equality,
neutrality and subordination to the general interests.

3.   In 1980 the main problem for television, however, seems likely
to be not so much one of structure as one of programmes and their
cultural orientation. Here we must step aside to examine
television's "functions" in society as a whole. Of one of these,
all the rest might well be mere by-products: the constant
transformation of reality into show. Doubtless, McLuhan was not
wrong to consider that broadcasting techniques in the end had a
real effect on our ways of thinking, acting and feeling: "the
medium is the message". But that is not the main point: television
now forms an integral part of society's self-awareness. It is
through this constantly self-provided show that society views its
present, its aims and its future. Jean Cazeneuve is right in
thinking that television has taken over a function which formerly
belonged to religion: it is a kind of substitute for the myths
and rites which from time immemorial have enabled men to adjust
to their condition and accept the unconditional.

      This takes us out of the field of institutions into that of
customs. The move is bound to disturb us: it reveals television's
extraordinary vulnerability to passing fashion. Marcuse was
doubtless right to stigmatise the conformity of television which
he observed in the United States in the early sixties, but
Jean Cazeneuve was no less correct to argue ten years later,
when considering European television systems and their American
precursor, "Humanity has made the unusual, the abnormal and the
new the very symbol of its acceptance of history". He admits
the ambiguity of such behaviour: "While it still feels the age-old
shiver of fear when confronted with the unusual or marginal,
humanity deludes itself that it has come to terms with it".

      Some people feel that television, like the whole cultural
industry, oscillates permanently between conformity and protest.
This is a reassuring but not a convincing view. For television's
real power, as we know, cannot be measured only during election
campaigns. It lies mainly in its ceaseless permeation with a
system of values of which it shows only what are, apparently,
the most harmless signs. However, real control over that power
is not just a matter of institutions or of legal acrobatics
within administrative bodies: it lies with the viewer himself
and the antidotes he is able to find to alternately toxic and
mood-elevating poisons.

GUIDELINES FOR THE NEXT DECADE

1.   Let us start with one conviction: the future of cable televisio
is neither unforeseeable nor inescapable. It certainly offers
an opportunity for action by variously organised groups, which
must bear their share of risk in television's new adventure and

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and some institutional adjustments must be made here and now to provide balance and mutual limitation between interests. It is, however, equally true that the future cannot be investigated by extrapolation alone: some other method is required.

This lies mainly in a certain state of mind, the only one possible in forecasting that is both technological and social. The question of the relations between techniques and societies can scarcely be avoided. Techniques have the same possibilities and limitations everywhere, but this by no means implies that everywhere the same "use" must be made of them. Indeed, the recent history of the press and cinema suggests that the differences between countries are increasingly outweighing the resemblances: the English press differs more from its French counterpart today than it did twenty years ago. National television systems seem to be going the same way, from resemblance to difference.

At this point let us look again at the philosophy. The question is not just an academic one: are modern broadcasting techniques - including cable - as restrictive, each in its own way, as is generally thought? And are the "missions" with which societies invest them as inescapable as those societies claim?

Logically, there are two possible conflicting theses. The one minimises technological influence and stresses the content of communications. Thus techniques are only neutral tools with which, in the final analysis, men and societies do what they like. However, it can equally well be said that techniques condition both what is transmitted and how it is transmitted and received.

McLuhan's interpretation of this second thesis is a caricature: "The medium is the message". This implies that techniques are so limiting that they impose their own ends.

In truth, communication techniques, like any others, are neither completely neutral nor utter tyrants. The extreme attitudes implied in each of these two theses are the Scylla and Charybdis of any really forward-looking thinking. It would be dangerous to suppose, even by implication, that communication techniques are equally suitable for broadcasting anything. But it would be an equally grave error to think that techniques, by their intrinsic nature, absolutely determine how they are used and the aims they can pursue.

Having failed to navigate between these two dangers, societies have often been paralysed by the initial "application" of a technique. Thus the written press took a very long time to break out of the moulds imposed in the last century by E de Girardin and Moïse Millaud. It required the American public's desertion in 1948 to get the cinema out of the rut that Hollywood had made for it thirty years earlier. Even transistors did not disclose all their virtues when they were first used for the reception of wireless messages.

What demands a forward-looking attitude above all is to overcome this fascination with the first "application" which, being inseparable from one economic, social and political context, should not on any account deter other societies from using the new device differently.

2.   In the audio-visual field, such an attitude today demands that those who take the decisions should opt for the <u>experimental method</u>. Too many uncertainties still surround cable television for us to risk jeopardising the future by premature rigid regulations. Legislation must resist the temptation to "precede" or "follow" the course of the new technique: it must be satisfied with accompanying the future.

In order, therefore, to establish the economic and legal framework for that future, we must give those in charge instruments for monitoring the experiment. To that end one might consider setting up a single national authority to sponsor pilot experiments and able to serve as a permanent pool of the resultant experience: efficiency, not a hankering after centralism, demands the establishment of such a body to guide both observation and research the sphere of communications.

This institution should be a light-handed one able to limit its own aims and ambitions, otherwise it will be in danger of wielding power for which it cannot be given any mandate. But its forward-looking vocation requires that it should not only stand by at the "take-off" of new techniques but also explore the "needs" of different publics and the "malleability" of their various tastes and centres of interest. It should therefore have contractual ad hoc links with various "social observatories": universities, market research institutes, trade unions, political, religious and cultural associations etc.

3.   Being dependent on a certain attitude of mind, this institution must require respect for an ethic in all those who represent it.

The first element in any code of audio-visual ethics which would have to be established gradually, could be a constant care to co-ordinate national objectives with local projects and ambitions. It may well be essential to allow local productions some degree of autonomy and initiative, but a desire for decentralisation and a legitimate respect for local initiative must engender neither parochialism nor provincialism nor tawdry cultural regionalism. The problem is without doubt a political one in the full sense. Counterweights must therefore be provided capable of frustrating the occult power of those who appropriate the new techniques first.

The second principle that must permeate tomorrow's television institutions is independence of de facto powers political and industrial powers. Of course it must not be thought that

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television can live in a state of weightlessness. But while the techniques are still coming into being, the functions and responsibilities of the various takers must be separated as distinctly as possible. Their potential number is legion: there are the universities, industrialists, financiers, central and local authorities, various kinds of association and individual notables. They all carry their own weight and their possible fields of action are very different. Functions in the new television companies (programme planning, management, building, enforcement of operating conditions) must therefore be clearly separated and the various levels of responsibility must be defined.

CONCLUSION

It would be tragic if, in cable television's slough of despond, each country of Europe in turn abandoned its technical promise to chance simply because each was unaware of its neighbours' experience. In the field of social and technical forecasting, what is true for each European country in isolation cannot but be true for the same countries as a community. Each must therefore reconsider its own audio-visual problems. But forward planning has until now been too narrowly national or nationalistic, and it must widen its vision to encompass the new political and economic horizons.