Towards Demassification of French Television in the 21st Century?
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ABSTRACT
Digitalisation of communications, economic globalisation, and the convergence of broadcasting with the technologies of telecommunications and computing are changing the nature of broadcasting as a mass medium. This article reviews the extent and impact of digitalisation in French television, as well as associated audience practices of individualisation of consumption and interactivity, that suggest a nascent demassification of the broadcasting media, and, possibly, changes in the relationship between broadcasting and national culture. Public policy in broadcasting, while now giving more emphasis to private enterprise than state dirigism in the modernisation of French audiovisual communications, still needs to address issues of regulation posed by the latest technological developments.

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1997 saw the start of major innovations in French television. These changes were technology driven, arising from the digitalisation of communications and the associated convergence of broadcasting technology with the technologies of telecommunications and computing. This article argues that, whereas we have become used to regarding television as the mass medium par excellence, technological change on the supply side of television is leading to demassification of usage on the consumption side — with consequences for the public service approach to broadcasting and for cultural sovereignty and national identity. Unlike the situation in the 1980s, the new paysage audiovisuel français (PAF) is coming into being much less through dirigist intervention by the French state, and more through commercial enterprise exploiting technological innovation. This is posing new regulatory problems. Television supply is now also being commercially driven within the context of global economic and industrial conditions. As a result, one may speculate that the future holds the prospect of an even bigger transformation of the PAF than in the early 1980s.

This article will review some of the evidence of change. In order to put the current period into perspective, we shall first recall schematically the transformations of the earlier period, which at the time seemed very radical, since they were related to technology, politics, cultural sovereignty and industrial modernisation. The article will then examine the digital revolution and technological convergence as they are affecting French television supply today — looking in turn at satellite, cable and terrestrial broadcasting. Finally, the consequences on the viewing side and the general
implications for public policy and regulation will be examined, using the concept of demassification as a way of understanding current trends.

The Liberalisation of Television in the 1980s

The period 1981-1987 was characterised by a number of interlinked innovations. The doubling of terrestrial television channels began the fragmentation of the national audience. The withdrawal of the state from its quasi-hegemony over broadcasting media took the economy of broadcasting into the market place, while Canal Plus and subscription television turned the listener-viewer into a consumer. These changes eroded the legitimacy of the public service model of broadcasting and the dominance of the generalist model of television channel. During this period, technological innovation was not as important a driving factor for change as were political, ideological and commercial factors.¹

Encryption technology as used by Canal Plus in their decoders was neither unique to France nor a technological novelty in itself. Two other technological leaps attempted in major state-driven national plans were unsuccessful and costly. The Plan Câble with optic fibre cabling (for all kinds of interactive services) was not taken up to the extent expected by local authorities within the context of their new found decentralised autonomy; and the promotion of a European norm for High Definition Television (D2-MAC) through TDF satellites was overtaken as an intermediate technology by American digital compression techniques.

Rather it was political and ideological factors (Mitterrand’s desire for change, the advance in the world’s richer countries of free market economics and individualist social policies, adopted on both right and left by French governments) that led to a partial deregulation of broadcasting, quickly exploited by commercial forces. Many of the politically led changes could be regarded as part of a state-led wider modernisation programme. From the 1980s onwards, neither the French state nor private enterprise could consider broadcasting policy as an autonomous sector of decision making and investment. Television became enmeshed into broader economic and industrial issues at an international level. Modernising national communications systems using telematics offered advanced economies like France in the 1980s an opportunity both to modernise broadcasting and to plan for what has been called the wired or interactive society. Such projects seemed all the more essential since communications policy had become of strategic importance in a European Union haunted by growing American and Japanese domination of European information technology sectors.

The issue of national cultural sovereignty (indeed national sovereignty tout court) became entangled with the issue of modernisation of television. In the 1980s French governments became

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acutely aware of threats to national sovereignty coming from two sides of the cultural industries sector. First, America and Japan had not only established an unassailable lead in computing software and hardware, but by the mid-1980s Japan had also acquired a dominant world position in the field of audiovisual equipment and seemed about to attack the market for satellite reception equipment and high definition television (HDTV). Secondly, the USA had the world's most powerful programme production industry, and was seeking overseas markets for programmes which had achieved profitability on the home market and so, as exports, could undercut European products.

Broadcasting policy was therefore made in the context of these industrial and cultural challenges to national independence. The problem was how to reconcile the promotion of French industrial competitiveness in terms of equipping the nation with the most modern broadcasting and communications infrastructure (thereby creating a large market for programmes) on the one hand, with the aim of protecting French cultural identity by preventing foreign programmes flooding on to French screens on the other. The task was not made easier by the growing adoption of economic liberalism in the world economy, especially since the French tradition was dirigiste and protectionist. Certainly there was a desire to create internationally competitive French broadcasting groups (Canal Plus, Matra Hachette). However the other strand of policy was protectionist: to protect the French market from mainly English language imports particularly from America (GATT and ‘l’exception culturelle’, and music quotas on radio).²

The Advent of Digitalisation in the 1990s

The communications revolution of the late 1990s combines changes in computing, telecommunications and broadcasting, which converge in the new digital communications media. Digitalisation has already radically transformed the global music industry, destroying the market for vinyl records, and creating a whole new mass market for CDs and CD players. The same revolution is beginning for radio and television; it will change the nature of broadcasting as a mass medium, and modify our consumption of it. Regarding the digitalisation of French television, an examination of the three delivery platforms of satellite, cable, and terrestrial, will show that it is really the commonality of developments which emerges as a salient feature.

Digital satellite and cable television

Rupert Murdoch showed the way to French television operators, putting greater quantity before higher technical quality of images. French providers have understood that viewers’ priority was not high-definition television (as implied by the state-led TDF project), but increased choice of
programmes, and that viewers would pay for what they wanted. In 1990, as growth in the home terrestrial subscription market was slowing, Canal Plus opted for a satellite subscription service as an alternative direction for expansion. The project entitled CanalSatellite turned into digital satellite television as technology permitted.

TF1 set up a rival digital satellite consortium with France Télévision, the CLT, M6, and France Télécom, under the name of TPS (Télévision par Satellite). Behind this competition is the struggle between the two major cross-media groups that are emerging in France: la Générale des Eaux (now called Vivendi) with Havas and Canal Plus versus Suez-Lyonnaise des Eaux, Bouygues (TF1), and the CLT-UFA (M6). Industry sources predict the third, smaller, provider, ABSat, may eventually be forced to co-operate or even merge with CanalSatellite. Each programme provider offers a bouquet of thematic channels, which is being separately marketed in competition with the others.

The operators are offering several thematic channels in their basic option, plus some premium channels, pay-per-view and extra radio and interactive services. CanalSatellite offers 112 different channels or services, and TPS 77. Among the channels are cinema channels and music radio services, generalist Moroccan, Tunisian, and Portuguese channels, and an erotic/pornographic channel. Interactive services include teleshopping and a planned home betting service linked to the PMU horse racing channel, the downloading of software and video games. One key element is the pay-per-view service, with Kiosque (on CanalSatellite only) offering not only near-video-on-demand access to recent films on pay-per-view, but all the French First Division football matches simultaneously live on 9 channels costing 50 francs for a single match or 75 francs for all of them on a given evening.

A satellite channel needs about a million subscribers to survive. Sport and cinema films are the ‘killer applications’ to hook subscribers, and the providers are buying up television rights where they can. The problem for Canal Plus is to avoid cannibalising its terrestrial channel, sold to a great extent on sport and films, by putting the best films and sport on satellite in order to compete with its rivals. The cost to the viewer is not negligible, totalling at least 1750F down-payment and 145F monthly, plus any premium channels and/or pay-per-view charges.

Cable television, by converting to digital, is moving in the same direction as DBS, but is able to offer a panachage of services from different satellites. The market for cable television in France is of growing significance. From 56 authorised sites in 1988, 617 cable networks were in service by December 1996, although 60 large and medium sized town sites account for three-quarters of the population covered. Cable sites cover over 7 million homes, one third of French households, with a penetration rate of 32.4%. So 10.7% of television owners are cable subscribers,
one third of these taking more than the basic subscription. In March 1997 Compagnie Générale de la Vidéocommunication announced that 98% of their cable sites were digitalised. Lyonnaise is intending to exchange all their old decoders for new digital ones progressively over two to three years. The major cable operators were predicting access to 80 channels all from one remote control and a single decoder by 1998 — plus the Internet and telephone connections to come.

However, the rapid expansion of cable in the early 1990s is slowing and the main companies are looking to diversify their services following the 1997 deregulation of French telecommunications, by bundling telephone and Internet services, for example. There is also a trend towards allying with digital satellite operators. In April 1997 Générale des Eaux-Vivendi became the principal shareholder in Havas, which effectively means a major alliance between Vivendi and Canal Plus. With an eye on the potential of digital, Vivendi has therefore preferred to maintain an interest in cable, despite its not yet reaching an operating profit. This suggests it still sees cable and satellite as being complementary. From the point of view of the consumer, both cable and satellite are moving in the direction of individualising consumption and offering an increasing range of interactive services.

Terrestrial digital television and technological convergence
Digital television can be transmitted and received by conventional means, and so generally means no renewal of either aerial or television set, just the purchase of a set-top box decoder, and a subscription. France put off a decision about terrestrial digital, partly in the light of the 1980s experience of competing delivery technologies that slowed down both cable and satellite. In 1998 two reports to the Secretary of State for Industry confirmed the technical feasibility of introducing terrestrial digital in France. The CSA has subsequently set up two working parties to investigate its technical and financial viability. French cable and satellite digital television operators are hostile to competition from digital terrestrial television.

The convergence of computing and broadcasting has some way to go in France, where households are not yet well equipped with personal computers linked to the Internet: 35,898 in 1997 (predicted to go to 92,804 by 2001), but 2 million French people use the Internet if universities and work places are included. The global home electronics industry is gearing up to take advantage of the convergence of the audiovisual, telecommunications and computing sectors in the form of PC-TVs. Microsoft has bought Web television, and given Philips and Sony the licence to manufacture a set-top box. Microsoft, Intel and Compaq announced a joint project to create new software and hardware to allow PCs to receive digital television from autumn 1998. They estimate sales of 40 million terminals capable of receiving digital television by the year 2000. Everyone is agreed that
the market for terrestrial digital in particular will be stimulated by the availability of television sets with integral decoders.\textsuperscript{11} It is arguable that the transfer to a higher technology will be no more difficult in France than in Britain, say, since the Minitel has created mass interactive teletext literacy in France. In the jump to a converged PC-television, the issues will therefore be less cultural than economic. Prime Minister Jospin has encouraged France Télécom to favour the migration of Minitel services to the Internet.\textsuperscript{12}

**Audiences**

A question remains: is there an audience in France for the new media? Cable and satellite channels are certainly gaining subscribers: 2.2 million homes subscribed to a cable service and 1.2 million to one of the three digital satellite services.\textsuperscript{13} A study shows that 51% of French people are interested in digital television (for cinema films, sport, and also for news) and 17.6% are considering subscribing.\textsuperscript{14} Industry studies also show that the major terrestrial channels are losing their audience little by little in this new competitive environment.\textsuperscript{15} In 1997 TF1’s audience share dropped to 34.5%, a loss of 1.8% in a year. Outside the big six channels the other broadcasters are up from 3.1 to 3.7%.\textsuperscript{16} The trend towards a more distributed supply of broadcast and multimedia leisure products looks set therefore to amplify. This is not just a French trend: European television audience figures fell generally in 1996-97. Reasons given were: increase in personal computers, massive buying of video games, CD-Roms, and nascent competition from the Internet.\textsuperscript{17}

**Issues raised by digitalisation**

These technological developments in the PAF are changing the way television is being consumed and have implications for public policy. They herald the gradual demassification of the broadcasting media as consumption becomes increasingly individualised, and involve both a more relaxed attitude on the part of the state towards the effects of television on French cultural sovereignty, and an erosion of French dirigism in this policy area.

**Demassification of a mass medium**

The notion of demassification is a useful analytical tool in considering ways in which changes in the PAF are bringing about a change in practices on the part of the viewer-consumer. There is evidence of the start of a paradigm shift, that may take ten or twenty years to work through, but which is changing the way the broadcasting media are consumed and used. When viewers are suddenly confronted with one hundred channels when they have been used to five or six, then it is not just a multiplication of supply of television services, but a change in the nature of the medium, or perhaps
a change of medium. This issue will need further close ethnographic study before firm conclusions may be drawn. Francis Balle argues that consumption of television is becoming more transactional, not to say interactive, as opposed to a passive, one-way process — transactional if only because, more and more, it requires the decision to ‘buy’ a programme or not, and interactive in that viewers can decide when to watch a film, which camera angles to choose at a sports event (as in Formula 1 racing on CanalSatellite coverage), in what order to listen to news items chosen from a catalogue-style presentation, whether to use it for video games, or teleshopping, or any of the other hybrid services being developed.\textsuperscript{18} Yves Roucaute prefers the term ‘réactivité’ or ‘interpassivité’ to ‘interactivité’, and ‘téléacteur’ to ‘téléspectateur’.\textsuperscript{19} At all events, the very nature of the new demand-led broadcasting system where supply far outstrips an individual’s capacity to consume all that is on offer implies high selectivity. Central scheduling of programmes may no longer fix viewers’ daily timetable; viewers will be able to time-shift their consumption more easily than at present (video recorders are already found in 71.7\% of French homes\textsuperscript{20}). This is becoming more important as the timetable of social and economic life is leaving behind the old ‘working day’ to become a round-the-clock society. Individual users, faced with a mass of supply, will have the possibility of constructing their own schedules with the aid of navigation and search software.

François Mariet sees interactivity and selectivity as leading to ‘la banalisation de la télé’, whereby television loses its special status as a medium and blends into the general leisure landscape.\textsuperscript{21} Viewers may consume it much as they now consume magazines, where multiplicity of supply has already specialised their content and fragmented their audience to a high degree, so that they work mainly to highly selective niche markets. This same multiplication of supply and consequent inevitable fragmentation of the audience is already beginning in television. The audience of the main generalist channels is being eroded, and cable and satellite and smaller channels gaining audience. Advertisers are very sensitive to this. TF1’s share of advertising revenue dropped in the first six months of 1997 to below the symbolic 50\% of the total television advertising market.\textsuperscript{22}

There is disagreement over the pace of the change. Just as the proliferation of highly specialised magazines has not destroyed the daily newspaper market, similarly the proliferation of niche television channels will not in the short term destroy the two or three major free-to-air generalist channels. French regulators foresee audience habits changing only slowly. Monique Dagnaud of the CSA forecasts\textsuperscript{23} that, although by the year 2000 25\% of viewers will subscribe to a cable or satellite bouquet, their viewing habits will change only partially: they will spend no more than 40\% of their viewing time on new thematic channels. This means that 90\% of total viewing will, in the near future, still be on existing non-digital channels.
However, the trends described above, when put together, add up to increased individualisation of consumption, and technological innovation is at the heart of this. First the miniaturisation and portability of the new media allow consumption to go in this direction. Once a collective act of consumption, television viewing is now becoming very individual. The television set, often still a focal point of the sitting room or living room, is moving to more peripheral parts of the home, as it corresponds to more individual uses. There is increasingly more than one set per home (35.5% of French homes have more than one television). Consumption of television on demand will accelerate this process, as will the multifunctionality of the new converged television set — being used to read mail, watch a film, listen to music, or watch a live football match. Despite disagreements about the future pace of change, demassification of the broadcasting media has begun.

National cultural identity

France may have lost one technological battle (D2-MAC) as it embraces digitalisation, but will the increased supply of French language channels nonetheless allow traditional cultural and national sovereignty aims to be achieved? Since the later European policy of Mitterrand, the French state has had a more ambivalent attitude to national autonomy than it had under de Gaulle, when defence of national cultural identity and a missionary belief in the universal value of French language and culture were taken for granted. However anti-anglo-saxon attitudes are still alive and well in the French policy-making establishment on both Left and Right.24

How are current broadcasting changes likely to affect French cultural autonomy? Can the successful creation of a large number of French language television channels by the digital companies be seen as a sufficient barrier to globalisation of the French television system? This will depend on what programmes these new channels schedule. Is there sufficient choice for French viewers to avoid being seduced by all-American programmes and maintain the Frenchness of their cultural identity? Since many programmes on the French channels are franchised versions of American programme concepts or not French-made at all, but dubbed American soaps or Japanese cartoons with a French soundtrack, this of course begs further questions about whether these are not just less obvious and all the more effective ideological vehicles for new non-national, hybrid identities. Do they not ‘represent and indeed produce, life-styles, beliefs, images, and identities that are separate from or lie outside or beyond the nation’?25

The extent to which the mass of viewers in France continue to watch the main evening news on the two main generalist channels will prove important in maintaining a common consciousness of events of national importance and therefore of national identity. But will TF1, like ITV, be
tempted to move the mid-evening news out of prime-time? Equally, the question as to whether the major national sporting events will remain on universal access free conventional television has exercised national governments. Extreme commercial pressures are being exerted to capture these events for subscription or pay-per-view broadcasting, because of their importance in bringing in viewers and therefore subscription and advertising income. Of relevance here is a recent decision by the EU Council of Ministers to establish a ruling — going against its free market policy on internal audiovisual matters — to allow national governments to ring-fence certain sports events of national importance to be bid for only by terrestrial non-encrypted broadcasters. The above begs further questions about the nature of national cultural identity and its relationship with the mass media.

**The erosion of French dirigism in communications policy**

Digitalisation is accelerating the whole process of change described above, although the start of the process pre-dates digitalisation. New technology is one, but not the only factor. The globalisation of the economy on capitalist lines and EU Single Market competition policy have both favoured free markets and worked against the protection of the old public service generalist model of broadcasting. The citizen-viewer of the public service model is now seen as a consumer of audiovisual products and services that can be bought on demand. The logic of the system and its justification is that the direct consumer-producer relationship is assumed to ensure the production of programmes the consumer wants, including catering for significant minority tastes.

However, digital technology is an accelerating factor, since broadcasting on demand becomes much more feasible when spectrum scarcity disappears as digitalisation brings transmission costs down. Seen from the outside at least, French policy makers appear to have recognised the limitations of the grand state-driven project and have left private enterprise to develop French digital television, whether on cable or satellite, with all the implications for French industrial and cultural sovereignty. The various commercial companies involved in television production and distribution seem now to have assembled a sufficient supply of French language television channels to make digital cable and satellite subscription channels attractive, and to be able to compete with non-French providers. This means that the state has less need to intervene to protect national cultural sovereignty, and can leave it largely to private enterprise and market forces to put in place the infrastructure of a new national communications network, as the French consumer invests in new set-top boxes with Internet capability.
There remains, for policy makers, the issue of regulation, and the new problems posed by technological convergence. One issue for the CSA, with its mission to guarantee pluralism, is to address worries that within the trend towards demassification an opposing force is also operating, bringing growing standardisation of programme supply and supplier. A wider issue involving the very process and mode of regulation however is posed by convergence. Hitherto, two quite distinct regulatory agencies have operated for the regulation of telecommunications and broadcasting: the ART and the CSA. The one has been more liberal and concentrated on technological standards, economic matters and competition, the other more censorious, concentrating on programmes and content. The previous distinction between the two in terms of modes of communication delivery is becoming increasingly blurred, and some ‘video’ and ‘television’ products distributed on new media will escape the content regulator, which in any case will find it increasingly difficult, not to say impossible, to monitor the sheer numbers of channels coming on stream at home and from abroad. There are those therefore who propose not only a clarification of the relationship between the two regulatory bodies, but preferably a fusion, or even a European-wide regulator. The fragmentation of broadcasting, its increasing privatisation, the convergence and internationalisation of the whole sector makes a former CSA commissioner advocate much lighter programme and content regulation, in favour of more economic and financial regulation.\textsuperscript{27} It is clear that regulation is becoming the key public policy issue in the brave new world of the PAF.\textsuperscript{28}

Notes and references

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8. VULSER, N., ‘Canal Plus prend 76% de la filiale câble de la Générale des eaux’, Le Monde, 10 September 1997, p. 27


10. Les Echos, 9-10.1.98, XX.


17. E.S., ‘Une baisse généralisée de l’audience’, Le Figaro Supplément Économie, 6 May 1997, p. XI.


24. For example, see the interview with former Foreign Minister Hervé de Charette in March 1997 (‘Il nous faut une conception offensive de la diffusion de la culture française’, Le Monde, 18 March 1997), and comments by Jean Glavany (PS), Chair of the National Assembly’s Parliamentary Committee responsible for broadcasting legislation, at the Colloquium referred to in Note 23.


27. Philippe-Olivier Rousseau, on leaving the CSA, ‘Rousseau: “Il faut fusionner le CSA et l’ART”, Le Figaro supplément économique, 10.7.98, p.XII. The CSA has asked the government to consider harmonising the regulatory status of cable and telecommunications networks (La Lettre du CSA, 107 (August 1998), p. 27), and is seeking further powers of economic regulation (La Lettre du CSA, 105 (June 1998), pp. 8-9).

28. On 30th November - 1st December 1999, under the aegis of UNESCO, the CSA is organising a ‘summit meeting’ of the world’s regulators to set the parameters for international collaboration on regulation of broadcasting services on the Internet - see the CSA position paper ‘La régulation des services audiovisuels sur Internet: enjeux et problématique’, La lettre du CSA, No. 114 (March 1999), pp. 2-11 (also on the CSA web site - www.csa.fr).