

A Thousand Beams Of Light

The era of national broadcasting in Europe is drawing to a close. But grand, standardised, pan-European designs, argues Geoff Mulgan, have stumbled on a Europe of cultural difference and regional diversity

For 40 years European television operated within national boundaries. Control might be in the hands of the regions (as in Germany) or of social organisations (as in Holland), but in most countries, including Britain, broadcasting was seen as a legitimate extension of the national state. The state determined what people could or could not see, what constituted fairness in news, and what was 'good' as opposed to 'bad' culture. Overseen by the state, broadcasters offered a mass, standardised service produced on a production line in vertically integrated institutions. The tradition was essentially social democratic. Broadcasting was seen as something to be rationally planned and directed downwards to improve the populace.

This tradition is now breaking down. The number of channels in Europe has more than doubled in only a few years. The new channels have brought new owners and new commercial interests in many countries. Italy was the first, with its dramatic deregulation of broadcasting in the mid-1970s, the proliferation of hundreds of independent local channels and, subsequently, their equally dramatic consolidation into Berlusconi's two networks in the 1980s. In France and Spain socialist governments have used deregulation to give new channels to their political allies, just as the British government is using it to tip the political scales to the right. Cable networks are slowly spreading in all countries giving access to dozens of foreign channels. In the small countries of Europe broadcasts always spilled over frontiers. But with the advent of satellites and cable

networks, the spills have become a flood. The very idea of national broadcasting has begun to crumble, and with it the idea that a nation can give its culture its own political roof.

It's still not clear what will replace the social-democratic tradition of national broadcasting. Rupert Murdoch's Sky channel offered one answer: 'pan-European' television would allow all Europeans to watch the same tv channels, just as they might listen to the same music and wear the same clothes. The idea was immediately appealing to the advertisers. It promised them the chance to target whole swathes of the European market with standardised images advertising standard brands like Coca-Cola and British Airways; applying Fordist principles in an industry traditionally attuned to cultural difference and nuance.

Language too had to be standardised. Like Europe's 'satellite newspapers', the *International Herald Tribune*, the *Financial Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* and Maxwell's promised paper, *The European*, Sky broadcasts in English. It's a standard language to complement standard electricity sockets, shoe sizes and measurements.

Murdoch was not alone in his faith in European television. He was soon followed by the ITV companies, by Robert Maxwell, Silvio Berlusconi and Ted Turner, and by bit players like WH Smith, all eager not to miss out on this new licence to print money. The European Commission was also captivated by the vision of 'television without frontiers', a free trade zone for tv to go with the internal market for shoes, washing machines and toasters, a single Europe

made manifest in the beam of a satellite.

In the real world pan-European television has been a flop. The grand plans have stumbled on a Europe that stubbornly refuses to behave as a single unit. After losing millions each year, Sky closed nearly all of its European offices in January 1989. Last year's near bankruptcy and sale of Superchannel, the 'best of British' project supported by the ITV companies, confirmed that the bubble had burst. Satellite broadcasting has turned out to be something rather different than expected.

Although most of 50-odd channels beaming down on Europe from satellites have the technical ability to reach much of Europe, most are aimed at regional and linguistic blocs: Sat 1 and RTL Plus at Germany, Austria and Switzerland, TV3 Scansat at Scandinavia; La Cinq, M6 and Canal J at France, Belgium and Switzerland. Those channels that aim more widely, such as Sky and Superchannel, Maxwell's MTV-Europe or the American channel Cable News Network (CNN), either lose vast sums of money or else reach miniscule audiences. The real battles are taking place within the regional blocs, between the new channels and older ones responding with more populist, entertainment-orientated programmes.

The standardising, mega-Fordist vision of pan-European television has proved to be a false start. No-one has been able to describe what a genuinely European channel might look like. The attempt to do so soon reveals the fissures in the very idea of a European culture. Europe remains a continent of heterogeneity, of violent struggles over meanings, languages and histories. Apart from the tensions between France and Germany or Britain and Ireland, innumerable regional and ethnic differences lie beneath the demarcations of the nation state, and are reflected in television. Catalan tv, Walloon tv, Welsh tv (S4C), and



Bavarian tv have turned out to have stronger political bases than a nebulous concept of Euro-tv.

Then there's the 13th nation of Europe, pressing hard for a role in post-1992 Europe, the Arabs of Paris and Marseilles, the Turks of Berlin, the Punjabis of Bradford or Southall. As British viewers of the Asian cable channel Indra Dhnush are aware, the new technologies of broadcasting can localise as well as globalise. Europe is no longer, if it ever was, a coherent place of white people, liberal-rationalism and faith in progress. If anything, that idea of Europe survives more powerfully east of the borders of the EC. Several thousand satellite receiver dishes in Poland, Sky viewers in Hungary, VCR owners in Eastern Europe as a whole and millions of East Germans watching the West's television act as a re-



minder of how hard it is to define the boundaries of Europe.

But perhaps the biggest problem in defining a European television culture is the problem of America. Traditionally what defined European television was the fact that it was *not* American. Quotas and controls protected Europe from the onslaught of the world's most powerful television economy. Even private channels made much of their aversion to the baser pressures of commerce associated with American tv. In the 1980s much has been made of the need for European alternatives to *Dallas* and *Miami Vice* such as *Black Forest Clinic* and *Chateauvallon*. Aware that the US and Britain are the world's top two tv exporters, Mitterrand's cultural minister, Jack Lang, tried to create a Latin 'audio-visual space', linking France

to Iberia and Latin America so as to counter Anglo-Saxon domination.

The problem with all of these approaches is that for 80 years American culture has been more than an alien import. In the form of the detective novel, the Hollywood film, soul and jazz music, it has also often been a more popular culture, more open, more alive and more attuned to a working-class experience than the high culture promoted by European states and broadcasting systems. This history allows the new channels, dependent on US imports, to parade as the populist alternative to dull, paternalistic public service. Sky even cheekily described itself as 'alternative television'. That the European Left still responds to the threat of 'wall-to-wall *Dallas*' with calls for a new Europe-wide channel of opera and theatre

shows just how poorly this history is understood.

The problem of America also raises the question of how we respond to US cultural imperialism in an age of American decline. This is, after all, the era when Sony owns CBS, when an ex-Australian owns 20th-century Fox and with it much of the American film heritage and when Italian tv is littered with imports from Brazil and Mexico as well as more predictable American ones. There are already signs that *Dallas* and *Dynasty* are having to give way to *Neighbours* and the tele-novelas.

Battles over the television markets of the future have helped to put broadcasting at the top of the European Commission's industrial agenda. Backed by most of the EC governments (with the notable exception of Britain), the Commission is planning

an integrated 'broadband' infrastructure of fibre-optic cables for the late 1990s, a network with limitless capacity, ultimately capable of allowing a viewer in Belfast or Oporto to call up a Pasolini or Wenders film, a Bayern Munich football match or a Spanish discussion programme. If realised such a network would dramatically change the cultural landscape. It would also spell the end of the nanny-state, social-democratic tradition: even Lord Rees-Mogg would be hard-pressed to keep tabs on several hundred channels from across the continent.

The ultimate promise of the broadband network is that it could take control of television away both from the state and from the private corporation. The network would be open and flexible, able to respond to the specialised needs of a Pentecostalist John Wayne fan in Birmingham, a DIY fanatic communist in Pisa, or a feminist film buff in Copenhagen. Control would pass both upwards and downwards. Up to the European level, to agencies responsible for overseeing the economy of broadcasting, and down to local and regional bodies with the power to give licences and to fund local channels.

Achieving the cultural potential of a broadband network will depend on political will and imaginative planning at both these levels: levies and taxes on the bland channels full of imported material; public funding agencies to finance minority material, the bizarre, the challenging, the investigative; ownership rules to break up the conglomerates; independent European news services to tell us what the European Parliament and the commission are up to on our behalf; guarantees of universal access and industrial plans to distribute tv production to the regions.

Who knows, in 2010, rather than being an endless cycle of *A-Team* repeats and Pepsi ads, European broadcasting might even be something to be proud of. •