

Regions vs states and cultures in the EC media policy debate: regional broadcasting in Belgium and Spain

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Much of academic research concerning television policies has been centred around the dichotomy 'public' vs 'private' television. Two trends seem — at least partly — to explain this concern: first, the last decade has seen the growth of private channels and the demise of formerly protected public broadcasting monopolies. Second, the advent of the EC (now EU) on the audiovisual market has raised serious questions and problems regarding the deregulation of national broadcasting markets.

In the wake of this problem another dichotomy has arisen. Even though less attention has been paid to this, deregulation clearly seems to juxtapose so-called 'small' states and 'large' ones. EC policies aim to protect and stimulate a European audiovisual industry, but anti-protectionist and deregulating measures and guidelines seem to favour strong, established European audiovisual industries to the detriment of those operating in smaller nations. Thus it is feared that a strictly economic logic would help strengthen the position of majority languages such as, for instance, English, German and French, while minority languages such as Dutch, Greek or Danish seem to be faced with ever-growing problems to produce television programmes in their own language in a unified Europe. The very rules which try to protect the European audiovisual industry seem to be destroying certain European audiovisual cultures.

1988 saw the launching of DAVID, a project aimed at promoting these smaller audiovisual cultures. Part of the argument clearly seems to be that a special effort ought to be made by the EC to permit limited state intervention and protection in the case of these smaller audiovisual markets.

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So far the discussion has mainly been one of 'small states' vs 'large states'. In this article we hope to show that the problem is more complicated than that. Even though Katzenstein (1985) has documented the importance of state intervention in small states, especially when these are confronted with international economic imperatives, his arguments seem to bear little or no reference to the problem at hand. By describing the situation of regional television in both Belgium and Spain we hope to offer a better understanding of the problem. We shall argue that these examples show that both the distinction between 'small states' and 'large states' and the, slightly more precise, distinction between 'small cultures' and 'large cultures' is too limited. Definition and legitimation problems would be solved if the attempt to dichotomize the issue conceptually along these lines were dropped. Instead the argument should be posed as a question of larger or smaller *regions*. Using 'region' as a conceptual starting point pays more attention to the political realities which led to the emergence of local or regional television. These political realities cannot be ignored.

Regional television

Following Zimmerman (1990), five types of regional television can be distinguished. They form a continuum from low or non-existent regionalization to (almost) total decentralization. One can distinguish:

1. Regional production centres that work for a national television corporation as regional news correspondents, as is the case in Ireland and Greece.
2. Regional production centres which have the exclusive rights to distribute or broadcast local news independently in their own region. Examples of this kind of situation can be found in France, Denmark and Italy.
3. Regional production centres which have more than one hour of broadcasting time and which have a 'job description' extending beyond mere news reporting to include, for example, cultural or entertainment programmes or even advertising. The main task, however, remains the complementing of the nationwide station. The BBC seems to be a good example.
4. Regional production centres which broadcast a full range of programmes, but within the frame of an organization covering a larger territory. In Germany each of the *Länder* (member states) has its own regional broadcasting system, but all the *Länder* broadcast under the umbrella of the federalized public broadcasting system (ARD).
5. Fully independent regional broadcasting services are provided by

autonomous public corporations which cover their own territory. Spain and Belgium are good examples.

Regional decentralization of broadcasting in Europe has, for the most part, been permeated by strong political and cultural reasoning. It has been argued that public service broadcasting was conceived of as a cultural lever in the hands of European states for the defence of their national culture (Schlesinger, 1991; Drijvers, 1992). In a first phase this lever operated in two directions: on the national level, public service broadcasting sought to unite nations by ignoring local and regional differences and by presenting a unified national culture; on the international level they sought to defend national cultures against the growing threat of internationalization which also affected national economies.

Such a cultural approach, however, cannot explain the existence of the highly federalized broadcasting system which exists in Germany where regional diversity and tension is much smaller than, say, in France, where broadcasting is highly centralized. Also, in countries which do have both strong ethnic differences *and* regional television, such as Belgium and Spain, this decentralization is the result of very dissimilar processes.

One way of explaining this is by referring to probably quite different *policy styles*, which would explain why countries always react in a certain, almost predictable, manner (see Richardson, 1982; Freeman, 1986). This approach, however, has often been refuted (see, for instance, Wright, 1988) since sufficient examples of 'atypical' policy-making can be found to oppose almost every *policy style* supposedly ruling policy-making in those countries. In other domains, for instance, it has been shown that in states which are called 'neo-corporatist', key elements of policy-making have been basically pluralist, whereas much 'weaker' states have shown a tendency towards neo-corporatism in specific areas of policy-making (Van den Bulck, 1992).

To solve this problem, it has been proposed by what is sometimes called the *policy community approach* (see Wright, 1988; Rhodes, 1986; Van den Bulck, 1992) to look at lower levels of decision-making. As such, policies regarding regional broadcasting in Belgium and Spain should not be explained by referring to a policy style which would characterize policy-making in those states *in general*, but, rather, one would have to look at the particular *policy community* dealing with this issue and study how these particular policies in these particular configurations of actors and policy issues came about.

This article argues that the discussion about broadcasting and culture in the EC has been centred around economic and cultural arguments too much and too unilaterally. The cases of Belgium and Spain will show that often regional broadcasting and the problems resulting from it are *not* the result of an economic or even a cultural rationale, but rather of political

factors. It will be shown that the impact of political reasoning on broadcasting institutions is more important than mere cultural factors.

Regional television in Belgium

When the Belgian state was created in 1830 it was originally thought of as a unitary structure. Strong conflicts, however, soon started to divide the population, setting free-thinkers against Catholics in a first stage and dividing the free-thinkers into (free market) liberals and socialists in a later stage. Attempts to pacify these strong societal divisions (which are usually referred to as 'cleavages') led to a consociational system of pillarization (see Pijnenburg, 1984; Zolberg, 1978; Van den Bulck, 1992), though it has also been compared to neo-corporatism (Van den Brande, 1967; Van den Bulck, 1992).

From the start, however, a third cleavage split Belgian society in at least two parts, a conflict which has been more difficult to pacify: Dutch-speaking Flemings felt discriminated against by French-speaking Walloons and the upper class. Such a division, of course, was particularly important in cultural matters. As such, respect for regional diversity was not at all evident. Education, for instance, was unilingually French on every level but the primary for a long time.

The birth and development of broadcasting accidentally coincided with the rise and the growing importance of the Flemish movement. After an initial stage, during which broadcasting was largely privately organized by sociopolitical and commercial groups, a public broadcasting system, the NIR/INR (Nationaal Instituut voor Radio-omroep/Institut National de la Radiodiffusion), was established in 1930. From the start it was governed by a unitary structure, mainly directed towards the French-speaking community (even though there were broadcasts for both language groups) (Burgelman, 1990: 62). There was one director, assisted, however, by two 'language directors'. In 1936, two subdirectorates were created, one for each language group. In 1960, a few years after the introduction of television, the NIR/INR was split into two separate institutes, each providing broadcasting services for one of the language groups and regions: the BRT (Belgische Radio en Televisie) for the Flemish and the RTB (Radio et Télévision Belge) for the French-speaking community (in a later stage both stations extended their names to BRTN and RTBF, indicating their respective languages: Dutch [N, for 'Nederlands'] and French, which, especially in the Flemish case, was an answer to political pressures demanding that the 'Belgian' of the name be changed in its regional equivalent).

Typical for the Belgian situation is the fact that this division of the unitary institute was not the end of regionalization. One might even say that

regionalization did not fully start until the 1960s. Even after the unitary, national institute had been split up, both new broadcasting corporations were still governed by national rule. On the other hand, technical differences between both groups became apparent even before they were split up, as was the case in the early 1950s when the Flemish chose the 625-line British standard and the French speakers chose the French 819-line norm as their television picture-form (forcing the Belgian viewer to buy expensive television sets which could receive both signals).

The 1960s saw a rise in importance of language problems and of parties representing regional interests. This eventually resulted in a first constitutional reform in 1971. Separate 'cultural councils' became responsible for 'cultural matters' in the Flemish community and the French-speaking community. In 1980 this reform reached a new stage and the cultural councils were replaced by the 'Council of the Flemish Community' and the 'Council of the French Community'. On both occasions responsibilities for broadcasting regulation and policy were split up between the national and the community government. Certain elements (such as the decision of whether to allow private television or advertising on the public channel) remained a national matter, whereas cultural and content matters became a concern of the community councils, with enough grey areas to allow for competition and confusion between (national) laws and (community) decrees. Typical was the fact that the revenue of television licensing (nationally collected) was only partially used for television by the community councils, who needed this money for other projects due to the absence of a regional income tax. Only since the most recent reforms of 1988 do the communities have the full power to exert control over the broadcasting channels on both cultural and economic matters. (For a more general description of the recent reforms of the Belgian state, see Brans, 1992; Witte, 1992.)

The coinciding of the pacification of the linguistic cleavage and the development of independent French-speaking and Flemish-speaking channels is a clear example of the extent to which broadcasting in Belgium is a political matter. It was not so much a process of growing cultural awareness, but rather one of growing *political* awareness.

The other cleavages, however, have always played at least an equally strong role. Before the emergence of the NIR/INR, broadcasting was largely in the hands of independent groups linked to the pillarized organizations. As soon as a national broadcasting corporation was founded, political parties and groups representing various factions of the pillars gained the right to have airtime on the public channels.

In a similar fashion the emergence of private channels and of advertising in the late 1980s was largely a result of political processes (which differed substantially for the French speakers and the Flemish). The Flemish case is an interesting one. During the early 1980s there was a growing concern,

especially among the politicians of the Christian Democratic CVP, that the Flemish BRT had become a 'socialist stronghold'. Both the CVP and the liberal PVV therefore favoured a process of deregulation which would lead to the establishment of a private channel. Such a channel, however, would have to be dominated by the newspaper press, officially to avoid the damaging effects of the introduction of television advertising. Eventually, the newspapers (largely allied to the Christian and, to a lesser extent, liberal pillars) did participate (to an extent unwillingly) in the creation of a commercial channel (VTM) which immediately received the (politically guaranteed) monopoly on advertising.

Despite the small size of the Flemish region (which could, in principle, make it easy to receive signals from foreign transmitters), the control of the Flemish audiovisual broadcasting market is quite easy because more than 95 percent of households have cable television. Though this means that over twenty-four channels from more than eight countries can be seen in Belgium, the government can effectively order the cable companies not to transmit the signals of unwanted channels (thus, for instance, shielding off the commercial channel from other commercial channels broadcasting in the same language from other countries).

Summarizing, one has to conclude that broadcasting in Belgium is above anything else a political matter. Evolutions in that field are dominated by political concerns. Reference to cultural elements is important only in a rhetorical sense. Given the EC's preference for deregulation, the cultural is used to legitimate the attempts to shield off the Belgian audiovisual market, whereas in reality the real concerns are political and partly economical (protecting both the Belgian press and the audiovisual industry). Typical of this is the almost general politicization of recruitment and promotion in both BRTN and RTBF (Burgelman, 1989) a process typical of the Belgian civil service in general (see Hondeghem, 1990).

Regional broadcasting in Spain

The Spanish public broadcasting corporation, TVE, was founded in the 1960s at the time of what is known as the 'economic miracle' of the late Francoist period. From the beginning it was conceived of as a systematic agent for political domination and hegemonic control over Spanish civil society (Bustamante, 1989). Remarkably, a licence fee was never established, making TVE a rare example of a public broadcasting channel funded at least partly through television advertising.

Regionalization of TVE began in 1971 with as its sole purpose the creation of regional centres acting as news gatherers for the national channel. The centralist dictatorship had no intention of legitimating or

recognizing in any way the diverse regional identities of Spain, as can be shown from the inclusion of the Basque country into what was called the 'Northern Regional Centre of TVE' together with Navarre, Burgos, Longroño and Santander, all of them regions with more cultural diversity than homogeneity. In fact, today each of these provinces belong to different regional units.

The current situation of Spanish television is based on the 1980 TVE statute. Five years after the death of the dictator the two main parties, the ruling UCD (the centre-right coalition, in power during the transition period, 1977–82) and the PSOE (Socialist Party) reached a consensual agreement (RTVV, 1991: 203–61). The practice of acting by consensus, which was the main feature of the Spanish parliamentary structure during the transition period, was used to maintain political control over broadcasting (Sanchez Ferriz, 1990). No attempts were made to democratize TVE or to make broadcasting more independent from the Ministry of Information and Tourism. A General Administrative Council was set up to act as a watchdog. Its twelve members were nominated by parliament, reflecting the proportion of seats held by each of the major parties. Furthermore, the Council's role was merely that of a consultative body for a general director, appointed by the government, who enjoys extensive powers. Finally, and quite contrary to many other European public broadcasting services, other interest groups (such as workers, viewers, regional representatives, etc.) have always had virtually no say in the running of TVE (Bustamante and Salun, 1990). Such excessive influence for the political parties in power at the national level in controlling TVE explains why the option of 'regionalizing' the second national channel (as an alternative to the newly born regional broadcasts) was openly dismissed by the nationalist elites of the periphery.

The 1980 statute still defined television broadcasting as a public service controlled by the central state. The democratization process, however, had resuscitated the nationalist movements, especially in those regions which had an independent stature during the Second Republic: Catalonia, Galicia and the Basque country. The centre-right nationalist parties of Catalonia and the Basque country (CIU and PNV, respectively) achieved important parliamentary representation in the first general elections. The 1978 Constitution had recognized them, together with Galicia, as 'historical nationalities' with the right to assume, among other things, the competence to create their own broadcasting system. The Catalanian and the Basque 'Comunidades Autónomas (CCAA, the new denomination of the Spanish regions) began broadcasting on separate television stations at the beginning of 1983.

There is much discussion about the legality of those first emissions. Even though the MPs of the regions claim that no prior law-making was needed because the right to establish regional broadcasting was written down in

the Constitution (Ornia, 1984: 150), there was no formal legal framework to allow the broadcasts. In fact, such a bill was passed hurriedly only after the broadcasts had started. It seemed quite obvious that the national government tried to limit the role of the regional channels, giving legal priority to TVE in a number of domains. The regional channels refused the offers of TVE to provide technical assistance with the argument that the national channel was trying to gain some form of control over them by making them technically dependent (Maneiro, 1989).

The regional broadcasting channels were originally thought of as, quite literally, *regional* channels: they had to broadcast in the local language and only to the local region. Both the Catalanian and the Basque channels, however, pursued geographical expansion, an increase in broadcasting time and the creation of new channels. The establishment of ETB-2, a Basque channel broadcasting in Spanish, was particularly controversial. It showed manifestly that the regional channels were competing with the national one and aiming for more than the local audience. The leading party PSOE, opposed by majorities of different parties in both the Catalanian and the Basque regional government, retaliated by establishing regional channels in three areas where the Socialists control regional government: Madrid, Andalucia and Valencia.

The fact that only the Valencian channel still had distinct local cultural characteristics is a clear illustration of the evolution described above. The new peripheral elites were impatient to enjoy a share of the central state's broadcasting monopoly. Once this monopoly was broken by the 'historical nationalities', a new equilibrium had to be reached with the creation of new regional channels, be it for linguistic or historical reasons. Officially, the new channels pursue three goals: (1) the preservation and enrichment of regional customs and traditions; (2) the gathering and dissemination of impartial and balanced information about the region; and (3) providing employment through the development of a local audiovisual industry. Let us briefly discuss these three goals.

1. The regional channels provide at least 35 percent regional productions, mostly news and entertainment. Some of these programmes have been made with the aid of FORTA (the federation of the regional channels) meaning that they are made in the Spanish language, not the regional language. Also, primetime programming is mainly non-regional (Maneiro, 1991).

2. The 'third channels' have copied the organization of TVE. As a result the impact of the regional political parties on recruitment, selection and promotion of personnel has become increasingly greater.

3. The creation of local audiovisual industries has largely been limited to dubbing and subtitling companies. Contrary to the public statements, this policy was planned from the beginning. The former Director of the Basque

ETB has admitted that before the creation of the corporation only 40 people were sent out to receive technical training while 200 people received training in dubbing techniques.

This discussion clearly shows that the regionalization of Spanish television was a political matter. Regional political elites used the development of regional channels as a lever to gain control over broadcasting in their region, whereas the centralist tendencies were clearly motivated by the national political majority to keep most (if not all) of broadcasting under their control. Economic and more 'classic' deregulation motives do not seem to have been, and are not, very important (see, for instance, the absence of the electronics industry from the policy-making process: Bustamante and Salun, 1990).

Discussion

The EC strongly emphasizes the concept of deregulation. Where the media are concerned, this notion ought to be defined as 'the licence to have a free rein, the domination of market forces and the removal of the state from its traditional role as guardian of the public interest in matters of television' (Silj, 1992). While trying to abolish the state monopolies which existed in several countries, the EC has also initiated programmes and funds to safeguard, protect or create a European audiovisual industry (Garitaonandía, 1993). The fact that such an economic logic could seriously affect certain smaller audiovisual industries has been widely demonstrated (see Drijvers, 1992: 193). Usually, the conclusion of such analyses is that small nations should be allowed to protect, aid and stimulate a *national* audiovisual industry, even where such would be forbidden by EC deregulation laws.

The example of regional broadcasting in Belgium and Spain, however, can serve as excellent illustrations to show that juxtaposing small and large states in this debate is wrong, or, at the very least, conceptually superficial. What Burgelman and Pauwels (1992) call 'the specific situation of the small European states' is, in fact, not a situation specific for small European states at all. Their reference to the Belgian situation is a rather unfortunate example. What they call 'national television' is, in fact, *regional* television, since Flemish and French-speaking television are totally separated, serving different audiences. If the conceptual division of 'small states' and 'large states' were accepted by the EC, this would mean that countries such as Ireland and Belgium would be allowed to introduce government aid for audiovisual industries while, say, Spain and the United Kingdom would have to abide by the rules of deregulation. This, however, would force the latter states to ignore any problems faced by regional broadcasters providing programmes in, say, the Basque or the Welsh language.

TABLE 1
Comparison of 'size' of the language region and the size of the national state to which it belongs

'Size' of language region	Size of state	
	Big	Small
Big	Spanish English Galicia (Portuguese)	Wallonia (French)
Small	Catalan Basque Welsh Gaelic (Scottish)	Flemish Gaelic (Irish)

Nevertheless, one can easily argue that the 6 million Catalonians may well have a harder time maintaining their cultural diversity in a state the size of Spain than the 6 million Flemings have in a largely federalized Belgium where they are on a par with their French-speaking counterparts.

Fine-tuning the distinction by referring to 'small cultures' vs 'large cultures' would not solve the problem either, because this would lead to rather strange conclusions. If supporting 'small cultures' were allowed, this would enable Spain, for instance, to help mount a Basque audiovisual industry and the United Kingdom to support a television channel broadcasting in Welsh. Small cultures, however, are usually defined by referring to minority languages (Drijvers, 1992: 194) which, in the case of television, seems to make sense: language is the biggest barrier for foreign programmes, which, at the very least, have to be dubbed or subtitled before they can be aired in a foreign culture (Biltereyst, 1992). Such a logic, however, would lead to the conclusion that the Belgian government would be able to give support to the Flemish broadcasting industry, but not to the French-speaking broadcasters, even though these actually provide programmes for a much smaller population. The same could be said for Galicia, the Spanish Comunidad Autónoma with a language closer to Portuguese than to Spanish. Since the Portuguese-Brazilian culture is of a magnitude similar to the Spanish, no 'classical' argument would support public financial aid for a Galician broadcaster (see Table 1).

The solution, therefore, seems to be to speak of the problems of small regions. Such an approach, however, is far from obvious. First of all, what is a region? In Belgium, for instance, the concept 'regional television' is sometimes used to refer to units smaller than those this article deals with (see Drijvers, 1992). This is why *language* is an important factor. A region could, therefore, be defined as *a distinctive culture within a nation-state separated from the rest of that state by a common language*. This would allow for the French-speaking region in Belgium or Galicia in Spain to be

seen as a small region: small, because of its size, not because of its language.

The question, however, then becomes: *why* distinguish between small and large regions? After all, as Drijvers (1992: 194–5) has shown, small regions with a widely spoken language should face fewer problems exporting their own audiovisual products and importing other products in their own language. One might try to tackle the problem by referring to cultural or sociological arguments to claim that every culture should have (or needs) programmes made by and about local people and with local news, but such a discussion is endless (e.g. why would the French-speaking Belgians ask for an exception to the rule, when French-speaking regions in France are forced to watch programmes which are strongly directed towards Paris?). What the analyses of regional broadcasting in Belgium and Spain have shown, however, is that regions are not just a conceptual exercise; they are entities with a strong political and cultural awareness. The political aspect is especially important. Regionalization of broadcasting is very strongly connected to political processes, both in Belgium and Spain. Both Burgelman (1990) and Drijvers (1992) have argued that a lot of cultural reasoning in the media debate was actually inspired by attempts of smaller states (or regions, in our framework) to protect political interests. Whichever cultural or economic logic one follows, the French-speaking community in Belgium is a strong political entity (with a very complicated federalization process to prove it). Similarly, the growing independence of the Spanish Comunidades is the result of a process which cannot be reversed and only seems to grow in importance.

Conclusion

Summarizing, we argue that the national and regional vs transnational television debate has largely used the wrong analytical concepts.

Small broadcasters have economic problems and like to refer to cultural arguments to demand protectionist measures. These arguments, however, are often hard to defend and can sometimes be used against them. Opposing big states and small states, big cultures and small cultures or even widespread languages and minority languages does not solve the problems of definition. These juxtapositions are still firmly rooted in an economic or cultural logic.

Our solution is to look at the political aspects. Most regional television stations did not spring up out of the blue. The Belgian and Spanish cases show that they were a result of a long political process. Regional television is the byproduct of a growing regional political autonomy. This autonomy typically is a *political* one, though economic and cultural elements can be (and, indeed, are) a part of that. The logic with which to approach these

processes, and, therefore, these television channels, can therefore only be a political one.

In this respect, the EC has no choice but to take the demands of regional television into account. Whichever may be the vague economic or cultural arguments with which they try to state their case, the truth is that the real logic behind regionalization of television is a *political* one. The claims of regional television in Europe are therefore legitimate only or at least (whichever position one prefers) to the extent to which the claims of the political entities ('cultures') they reflect are legitimate.

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