

Television, National Identity, and the Public Sphere, an Ethnographic Study applied to the Investigation of Two Television Debate Programmes in Scotland and Catalonia

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This article sets forth some considerations on issues of national identity and the public sphere in two stateless nations, Scotland and Catalonia, based on the study of the television production processes of two debate programmes: "La Vida en un Xip" (TV3, 1989-92), and "Scottish Women" (STV Scottish Television 1987-92) (1). The aim of this paper is to emphasise the support that this study gives to the ethnographic focus, less developed till now in the field of investigation of the products of mass communication media if we compare with other techniques such as reception analysis and text analysis. The support of ethnography in communication investigation seems essential to enrich research with data, information, and reflections which only the study of the means of the media themselves can provide, drawing the theme of the study closer to investigators and making them participants somehow in the communication process.

Selection Criteria for the Study Aims

The reflections presented in this article are the fruit of the observation and analysis of two maximum audience rate television programmes, to reflect on and study two concepts, the public sphere and national identity, from different parameters in the framework of two stateless nations, Scotland and Catalonia. This research begins with two aims: on the one hand, to observe how production processes of debate programmes act within the democratic working of the two televisions and how society feels itself represented in them; on the other, to analyse if these production processes imply considerations and attitudes on the different conceptions of the national identity of their respective countries, Scotland and Catalonia.

To carry out this aim, we chose two debate programmes with a similar format, placed on maximum audience rate bands, taking into account their political, legal, social and cultural frameworks, and also the audio-visual industries within which they operate. Programme grids broadcast by the different television channels at the time of the beginning of the study (July 1992) were studied, and two programmes were chosen:

"La Vida en un Xip" (DCo.S.A. for TV3) and "Scottish Women" (Skyline Productions for Scottish Television, STV). These two programmes had characteristics suitable both for the methodology and for the purpose of the research: (i) both were programmes broadcast in the geographical ambit of political communities with different self-government administrations but coexisting within two democratic plurinational European States, the Spanish State and the United Kingdom; (ii) both programmes gave the audience debates on themes considered as being of general interest, debates generated through contributions from different figures: experts, eyewitnesses, and studio audiences; (iii) both programmes also offered polling or voting processes in their formats, thus incorporating a quantitative slant which was added to the opinions of the studio audience. Methodological aspects derived from the comparison will be exposed further on.

This format offers levels of analysis which, in the author's opinion, shed light in two directions. On the one hand, the study of the production process can show the influence of the diverse actuations on decision taking and design of the programme, while emphasising possible contradictions arising from the interaction between political and cultural contexts and the everyday of television production. Thus, the hypothesis set forth is that the issue of national identity in Scotland and Catalonia is manifested and accentuated when issues are exposed which directly affect their socio-politic and cultural contexts (issues of language, politics, habits, and cultural assignment).

On the other hand, the study of the production process analyses the possibility or non-possibility of the representativity of society in a television studio, and how professional practice in the television field fully conditions the concept of the public sphere (originally formulated by Jürgen Habermas 1979, 1989) and decants it towards a radical transformation.

In this article, three aspects are briefly stated: the exposition of the study, the conditioners of the methodology used, and the main conclusions.

Research exposition

The forementioned study was developed during a two-year period at Stirling University, Scotland, due to the author's will of distancing herself from her own ambit, Catalonia. Dedication to the empiric and conceptual study was divided in two phases: a first phase of research of ethnographical material and elaboration of the study of the two cases, "Scottish Women" and "La Vida en un Xip" with diverse stages of observation and interviews of both programmes; and a second phase during which an analysis was made of data, setting out from a theoretical discussion of the two concepts: national identity and the public sphere, in relation to the cases of Scotland and Catalonia.

The first phase consisted of periodic stays with both programme teams, analysing the material in diverse stages of production; assistance at all possible working days, and

carrying out open in-depth interviews with each of the team members involved in the process -network executive posts, managers, producers, presenters, writers, aides...-. All this material was taped and transcribed for later analysis. Also, during this phase, two poll forms were designed, one in English and the other in Catalan, to be distributed among the studio audience. These polls aimed at finding out what motivated people to assist at a debate programme, inquire into what feelings of national identity defined them, and see whether they established any relation between the programmes and their socio-political context. Data proceeding from these polls -about two hundred in Catalan and two hundred more in English- were analysed by means of a Stat View II statistical programme. Deductions and conclusions towards which these data decant support arguments defended in the rest of the study, but it will be impossible to reference them in these lines due to lack of space.

The second phase, during which there was also contact with the television channels and the programmes to bring the research data up to date, was centred on the theoretical study of the concepts which were the theme of analysis. Besides briefly describing the institutional framework of the two networks, STV and TV3, and also of the television producers who participate with them (Skyline Productions and Disseny per als Comunicadors i els Mass Media, DCo.S.A.), there is also a theoretical discussion about the intersection of the concepts of national identity and the public sphere in stateless nations and how this intersection modifies and conditions the production process of public communication in these countries.

Ethnography, comparison, and television

The author's professional experience in the television field leads her to believe that an analysis of its products cannot be carried out exclusively from a study of audience shares, but rather that it is essential to know the process which has created it. This process is not limited only to an in-depth study of each of the phases of television production, but must take into account the evolution of external contexts -political situation, cultural situation, communications media, the dynamics of the audio-visual market...-. At the time of the design of the study, the author considered that, in the same way as a biography leads us to understand a person's behaviour at a specific moment, a television programme must also be understood according to the people and institutions who had previously conceived it and carried it out with whatever motivations and objectives. This level of analysis is only possible if we come close to the themes of study and apply ethnographic and comparative methods. Naturally, this option presents some problems.

This is not by any means the first study on media to use ethnography as a tool to analyse communication media. Philip Elliot (1972), Muriel Cantor (1971), and Philip Schlesinger (1987) have written works in which they acted as observer-participants in the analytical process with different study objectives: a television serial, a study of Hollywood production, and the BBC news service, respectively. This study thus sets out from previous experiences which had shed light on audio-visual production in relation to communication policies in their respective contexts. However, ethnography

is a field which has its detractors. The two main criticisms of this analytical technique are the problem of access and the danger of excessive closeness to the theme of study.

In this case, naturally, both criticisms are pertinent. On the one hand, access is a problem to an observer-participant in a television programme. As in other professional fields, there are codes and a certain secrecy which prevents people from outside from fitting in and even less from taking part to later make an academic judgement. This situation breeds antibodies in the subjects studied and can become an insurmountable obstacle. In this case this access to the field was never a real problem. In the first place, because in the case of Catalonia, the investigator had been a part of the production team of "La Vida en un Xip", and in the case of Scotland, because of previous professional experience and the fact of being enrolled in a British University made access easier. Another possibility is the greater tradition of the use of these kinds of techniques in the UK. Scottish professionals had a more cooperative attitude in the transfer of and access to primary sources of information (programme dossiers, staff meetings, interviews, access to historical documents...) than Catalan professionals. As to the latter, however, it would not be fair not to state that most of this material had already been collected by the investigator before beginning research.

The other criticism of ethnography is that of approaching the object of study: the investigator could be seduced by the actuations and the project and lose critical capacity and the will to objectivity which should rule the study. This could also have been a problem affecting the study. In the case of "La Vida en un Xip", for obvious reasons, as the investigator had been responsible for some areas of the programme and had been linked to the producer DCo.S.A. for years. The fact that during the period of research, the team of "La Vida en un Xip" maintained distance and that the programme ended in June 1992, made distancing easier. In the Scottish case, surprisingly, this process was possibly more complicated, as the investigator was able to establish an easy and cooperative relationship with the production teams, and there was even a certain professional complicity in some stages of research. However, the fact of being a foreigner kept a distance which turned out to be positive when writing.

It is worth taking these risks which ethnography presents; the difficulty of access and the problem of nearness -a kind of Stockholm syndrome-, because the kind of information obtained is essential and there does not seem to be any other way of approach. However, both obstacles are relatively minor when compared with the benefits that overcoming them can have for research. (Hammersley, 1992).

The other factor of the methodology used is comparison. There are those who believe that we compare to discover similarities; but enrichment does not come from similarities which reinforce our models, but rather from contrasts which discover new parameters of analysis. As Teune (1900: 47) says: "the main aim of investigation, when comparing countries towards a theoretical end, is variety, practically the entire ambit of human experience".

Quite a few studies have been dedicated to comparative studies of communication systems, media in different countries, and formats (Brown, 1989; Etzioni-Halevy, 1989; Edelstein, Ito, and Keplinger, 1989; Silj, 1992; Prado, 1992; Gifreu and Saperas, 1994). But this is, perhaps, the first time that the comparison takes into account two specific television products, carried out by people with a specific personality, at a determinant moment in history and with specific motivations and editorial lines.

The fact of choosing Scotland and Catalonia was based on some structural coincidences: (i) both are stateless nations with political status within their respective States; (ii) both countries depend on many levels on the central State apparatus, especially as to communication media; (iii) neither the Catalan nor the Scottish people are specially active when trying to modify their current political status; (iv) but both countries are governed by democratic European systems in which freedom of expression is guaranteed and the products of communication media can be vehicles for expressing the identity of a people.

The wish to compare television programmes from these two stateless nations also covers another objective: to see how the end of the century globalising process of Western Europe, along with the influences received by cultural identities from foreign market products, influences the design of their products.

The comparative study reveals points of contact, but also mainly contrasts which shed a light on professional practices related to the two political cultures which are the framework of the study.

The contributions of research

No study, however wide its research objective, can be exhaustive enough to find all the questions formulated around issues as complex as a people's national identity and the representation of its public sphere, whether it is present or not in the communication media. This study, however, wishes to contribute towards shedding a little light on what is implied by these concepts in the ambit of the communication media.

To begin with, from the results of the polls carried out with members of the studio audience of the programmes "La Vida en un Xip" and "Scottish Women", the study corroborates the beliefs of other authors (Moreno, 1986; Par, s i Maicas, 1988; Gifreu and Corominas (eds.), 1991) about the existence of feelings of dual identity - assignment to more than one collective identity: British and Scottish, Spanish and Catalan, British and European, Catalan and European, etc. These polls emphasise that programme audiences on the set ascribe to them the capacity of becoming platforms for debate which represent their societies, and creators of public opinion. At first sight, this proof gives support to the hypothesis that, in fact, television programmes can work as spaces where a part of the public sphere (conceived by Habermas as a space where society discusses its objectives and their significance), is possible.

If this is so, the issue is to see how and in what way it is made possible within the canvas of production of the audio-visual world.

The study emphasises the contradictions which are implied when making television products conditioned by communication policies close to their respective nationalities while at the same time making productions which are competitive in the dynamics of the audio-visual market. It also shows the contradictions of communication systems with a high degree of autonomy in the editorial field, but with strong financial and structural dependence on the British and Spanish industry. One of the conclusions of the study is that the current audio-visual business in Europe makes television from stateless nations, as well as State networks, give greater priority to market pressure and economic aspects than to cultural aspects; or at least, that reconciling them is difficult and often incompatible. In the case studies expounded, this becomes clear, for example, in the tendency of both programmes to take up popular debate issues which guarantee an audience, choosing a studio audience for their ability of expressing themselves in a showy, generic, and clear way, or for their personal experience -an exposition of surprising and atypical life experiences- (2).

As to the Scottish and Catalan audio-visual industries, the comparative analysis indicates that both receive pressure from market deregulation and the influence of sector reregulation policies which affect content control, either by legal-parliamentary control as is the case in public radiobroadcasting corporations, or by autonomous control committees and commissions, as is the case in the UK. This forces both STV and TV3 to act as a result of this pressure; the immediate consequence is a design of programmes which are competitive on the market, popular, and within reach of the majority audience. "Scottish Women" and "La Vida en un Xip" show the effects of this situation in their evolution -incorporation of new elements into the programmes, or the step from non-daily news departments to entertainment, as was the case in Scotland-, but also in editorial decisions and the focusing of the addressed towards creating a performance during their broadcasts.

In this sense, both cases, "Scottish Women" and "La Vida en un Xip", evidence a homogenisation process in the audio-visual world which is evident in the formats, genres and production styles which are also close to other British and American debate programmes such as "The Oprah Winfrey Show" (USA) or "Kilroy" (UK) (3). In spite of this, both programmes adapt to their respective political cultures -the Scottish case shows control mechanisms of content control applied a priori to the broadcast of the programme, while the Catalan case trusts the programme host's ability during the debate-.

The study emphasises television as an actant of the construction/reconstruction process of a country's national and cultural identity, while also broadcasting by means of this medium people's ideas and those images which make up a part of a collective identity. This process of construction of the collective identity is conditioned by television's and programmes' dependence on their frameworks of operation -European, Statewide, Autonomous- and is modified and altered by these. The high level of

competition between networks also contributes towards making programmes which will satisfy the highest amount of the audience's political and cultural sensibilities, and is, therefore, far from assuming commitments in a context of dual national identity such as the case we are studying.

In the context of collective identity which affects Scotland and Catalonia, the study corroborates the Catalan saying "tants caps, tants barrets" ("different strokes for different folks"). That is to say that in issues of national identity each person -and this affects each actuant in the television production process- feels it in a specific way, and these beliefs affect decision taking, especially in the field of ideological exchange in social communication.

Thus, even though both STV and TV3 take up certain directions in the communication field in coherence with the ideological and political convictions which brought them into being and sustain them, the way in which a television programme can evidence these directions is mediated and filtered by the production chain; that is to say the transformation which can take place in the contact between its actuants and also everyday unaccountable events. If programme teams are stable -as is the case of "La Vida en un Xip"- the influence of the designers and the editorial line is more coherent and impenetrable; however, the instability of the "Scottish Women" teams and their link during long periods of time to the STV production schemes led the programme to theses and indications close to the network directions.

Both programmes faced the difficulty of producing debates on political issues and tended to channel national identity themes through a cultural slant -language, folklore, traditions, sports...-. This is a strategy oriented towards popularising politically transcendent issues and palliating the controversy that these issues generate in the people of Scotland and Catalonia. But it also reinforced the tendency, common to both programmes, of moving away from issues of the public ambit to come closer to areas of the individual's private life -intimacy, sexuality, health, work, everyday life, beliefs- in tune with an evolution common to the whole ambit of the public sphere in the complex societies of the end of the 20th century.

This tendency ousts from the thematic agenda of the programmes issues which affect society's structure such as the institutional and political framework in which it is submerged. Entertainment becomes progressively more important as a priority, often leaving information and opinion forming -which had defined it initially- to a second place.

The production teams of both programmes kept in mind issues such as the geographical origin of participants, their accents or linguistic idioms, and their opinions. These are considered, not to reject people from the producers' preferences, but rather to keep a balance which will avoid often receiving audience complaints (4) . Thus, the study manifests that in spite of their convictions or intentions, television professionals had to take into account both the political state of their respective stateless nations and their

conflicts of dual identity.

The analysis of specific broadcasts which had debated issues such as nation, language, national identity or traditions showed that these were especially touchy both for participants and audience -more aggressiveness during interventions, more participation, more pressure from lobbies-. Perhaps because of this, both programmes avoided positioning the editorial line in favour of any specific attitude and rarely proposed themes which favoured one. In the case of "La Vida en un Xip", we must emphasise that the producers' ideology often put words into the mouths of the fictional personages of the drama "La Granja" which was broadcast at the beginning of the programmes to give the audience a focus on an everyday context.

All the professionals interviewed during research admitted that the issue of national identity was a touchy one, both in Scotland and Catalonia, and that conflicting opinions were expressed during staff meetings and decision taking. STV had a not very clear policy as to that, and its directors found it difficult to define what Scottish national and cultural identity was. In Catalonia, the existence of a solid audio-visual structure and the progressive consolidation of the use and understanding of Catalan helped to define attitudes and limits to these issues.

Together with these problems, the case study of "Scottish Women" and "La Vida en un Xip" opens the field to some questions about the transformation of the public sphere in Western society.

These questions may be faced from an initial supposition: both "Scottish Women" and "La Vida en un Xip" were formats with a potential for becoming "portions of the public sphere" of which Habermas had begun to speak, and which has been developed by other researchers such as Garnham (1986), Cohen (1985), Curran (1991), Scannel (1989), Blumler (1992), Keane (1991), and Tomlinson (1991). According to Tomlinson (1991), viable communities of cultural judgement are still necessary, through which individuals can understand why we live as we do. A television debate can contain (why not?) the potential to be one of its scenarios. These forums are in some way a channel for society to express itself. The question is if it feels itself represented there and if this representation is possible based on the analysis of the production of both programmes which are the object of our study. Does daily practice allow television to be a real social actant in this rational and balanced public sphere?

To begin with, polls indicate that programme participants attribute this ability to them, and their social impact by means of newspapers and cases of specific repercussions in society (programmes about transplants have contributed to raise the percentage of donors, the formation of menopause self-help groups due to a programme on the theme) also indicate it. However, we must say that most people concerned in the production process are not very aware of this dimension.

Clearly, the making of television debate programmes indicates that their design looks

for a product competitive on the audio-visual market as a priority, far from the public service dimension which had inspired programme grids till a couple of decades ago. Small television stations in the stateless nations are also trapped in the globalising effect of transnationalisation and competition which market deregulation leads to. The need to build a public sphere which contains the principles of rationalising democratic dialogue, representative of society, as Habermas defines it, is not strong enough to fight against market forces, which at the same time displace educational and informative functions to the tail end of audio-visual priorities.

On the current scene, there is no place for a pure concept of the public sphere and it must be re-discussed in relation to the globalising concepts which all cultural communities are undergoing. We must take into account the incorporation of the concept of "entertainment" in the new codes of cultural and civic constructing in Western societies. The domain of the *res publica* is progressively mixed with the domain of the private ambit which intervenes in the former to materialise and individualise it according to the values of a post-modern society which is described by Melucci (1990) and Bauman (1990). There is also a progressive de-politisation which is slowly undermining the principles of the public sphere conceived by Habermas. The study of the themes on both programmes corroborates that we are going in this direction.

This public sphere which could be represented on television is denuding itself of intellectuality which, in many cases is incapable of adapting to the audio-visual discourse, lacking in nuance and space for academic discussion. The public sphere which allows for television is giving way to a new de-politised and popular intellectual who addresses a wide majority through the mechanisms of seduction belonging to the medium (Gella, 1976; Elliott, 1976). However, both debate programmes prove that, contrary to Habermas' exclusion of political actors in the public sphere, power institutions recognise the impact of these programmes and try to intervene in them. The role of the presenter is also important in these formats; he/she stands out not only as an active part of the expression of opinion and ideas, but also as a referee and energiser of the dialogue within these public spaces.

Due to all this, we must come to the conclusion that, because of the way these two television programmes were conceived and produced, and after having made a follow-up of their respective production processes, it becomes clear that the public sphere is far from its construction according to the concept of balance, rationality and democracy which Habermas proposed. Programmes are subject to pressures and dynamics which take them far from their objectives. What's more, in the context of stateless nations, this is emphasised by the political and cultural complexity which adds contradictory and conflicting feelings and which, because of a reluctance to make them public, those responsible for the programme tend to keep away from public ambit issues and to substitute them by the private ambit in television debates.

In spite of these restrictions, however, we cannot discard an evolution toward more favourable stages, taking into account the creation of new television channels in the

future which will be closer to the citizen (local television) and a will to democratise political institutions so as to rationalise imbalances created by a fierce market economy. Because of this, we cannot ignore the intrinsic value of the television debate format for the attainment of these objectives.

Television, by means of debates and other formats, expresses the transformation of society and shows us the way in which the public sphere must be constructed based on these changes. Television must not resign from making the purpose of entertaining its audience compatible with being a means of transmitting ideas, information, and problems which affect all members of different cultural and national collectives. Television is an instrument which allows the communion of thousands of people around an issue or an event -a royal wedding, a football match, election results, Olympic Games opening ceremonies, a debate on physical handicaps, a discussion on marriage break-up-; are these not all expressions of individual and collective identity? Thus, if television makes these moments of communion possible, we must consider that programmes have a potential for improving the balance of power in these spaces and for bringing about a more representative public sphere, closer to the interests of citizens, who are also television spectators.

The analysis of "Scottish Women" and "La Vida en un Xip" shows how programmes are articulated in relation to their function as: (i) economic products within a market, (ii) cultural products capable of providing these markets with knowledge, ideas, and plural points of view, (iii) products conditioned by institutions which mark different positions which conflict in the production process, and, finally, (iv) programmes made by people with their own ideas on what "public opinion" and "common sense" have to say when they are carrying them out.

Each and every one of these dimensions is inter-related and modifies the final result. A wider knowledge of the product (the communication process, the medium, the culture and the country) derives from the combination of reflections resulting from the various production stages. The researcher who approaches his subject through the eyes of ethnography realises the complexity of the actors that are needed for the televisive object to come together, reflecting that such a complexity cannot be described through methodologies which are distant from the productive network of television factory.

NOTES

1 This article is based on the objectives and methodology applied during the elaboration of the Doctoral Thesis: "Television, National Identity and the Public Sphere. A comparative study of Scottish and Catalan discussion programmes", directed by Dr. Philip Schlesinger, director of the Institute for Research on Cinema and Communication Media, Stirling University (Scotland).

2 In each case study there are analytical charts of the themes of each of the two debate programmes while they existed, and also an analysis of the type of the diverse actors -

experts, eyewitnesses, and audience. The role of the host is also analysed in relation to ability to orient the debate towards general aspects closer to the majority audience.

3 Both programmes start out from very similar dynamics, using the same selection procedures for themes and participants.

4 This was the case of "Scottish Women", which during its whole broadcast history had accumulated hundreds of letters to newspaper editors and editorials in which the presence of people on the programme with non-Scottish accents was criticised.

5 See the study by Livingstone and Lunt (1992; 1994) on the format of television debates.

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