

The Situation of National and Regional Public Television in Spain

Public Media in the Crossroad

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Abstract

Spain's Public National Television (TVE) faces the uncertainty of defining its role as the main public broadcaster at a moment when neither the economic situation of the country nor the waning satisfaction with the citizens with TVE, make things any easier. Furthermore, the government announcement of TVE's withdrawal of advertising in 2009 was widely commented, as there has never been any license fee in support of Spanish public media. On the other hand, the economic crisis that Spain is going through has posed the issue on the need of cutting down governmental expenditures on the desk of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy. Will these also include TVE, as it has happened with public regional media? Will Spanish citizens admit the importance of improving TVE now that two gigantic commercial media groups, Mediaset and Planeta, dominate the audiovisual landscape?

Keywords: public television, RTVE, TVE, national, Spain.

Introduction

Even though public television networks were spreading all over Western Europe after WWII, Spain had not yet recovered from the physical, and emotional, injuries inflicted by the Civil War (1936-39) that empowered Franco until his death in 1975. When it came to radio, private broadcasting stations developed successfully in the early 20s in Barcelona and Madrid, and these remained as the only music and information sources until the country plunged into the Civil War. This situation prevailed until April 1 1939, when the victorious official Radio Salamanca announced that the war was over. Public television, however, still had to wait almost two more decades to enter Spanish homes. And when it did so, the 28th October 1956, it was far from being a public television service or, to state it clearer, it lacked the public mission objectives that had inspired the rest of Western European public televisions (McKinsey & Company, 1999). Actually, public media were *public* in terms of "belonging to the State", as the case was with public education, public transport or public hospitals (Arriaza Ibarra, 2009). And TVE, *Televisión Española*, started out as the regime's "gift" to its citizens, very much using the same connotation of "public service" that ruled the other mentioned public services.

The years following Franco's death (1976-1981) were the so-called "transition years to democracy" amidst an uneasy situation as a result of the climate of political unrest that

stepped up immediately after Franco's death. However, the government -led by Adolfo Suárez, a former Director of TVE- slowly succeeded to rail the country towards democracy. Notwithstanding the fact that most public media were piecemeal being re-directed to private media businessmen and investors (Berumen, 2009) and once Franco had established a law that allowed the Spanish State to own at least 25% of all media, public and private, TVE remained "as the partisan and dis-orientated model once democracy was installed in the country, and it would remain as such during another quarter of a century" (Bustamante, 2010). This was partly because the only existing Law for the audiovisual sector was a Statute of Radio and Television (January 1980) that only reinforced the power of the State as owner of public national radio and television broadcasting, with no possible door left open for new private television channels (Nicolás, 2005), a model that differed once again from the rest of Western European countries where deregulation patterns were already leading to private channels in the early eighties.

However, in the case of Spain what definitely existed in TVE was a 'hybrid' model of public television, unique in Europe due to several factors: 1. Audiovisual production for television was limited to television-adapted theatre plays of classical authors, like Lope de Vega or Cervantes (Palacio, 2005); that is, there was no deeper cultural insight or cultural strengthening of the different Spanish regions and cultures by means of any kind of audiovisual production in the years of Franco's regime (1939-1975), at least not until regional televisions came about in the beginning of the eighties. 2. Censorship prevailed in TVE even in the period immediately after Franco's death, during the so-called "transition years". It was actually only after the introduction of commercial television in 1990 that TVE modified both its programming and its image, transforming itself into an including, *proximity* television open to all citizens. 3. Regarding funding, it is very important to point out that TVE was financed through advertising almost since its very beginning, as well as by some partial State budget aids.

Spain has never introduced a canon fee to support public television. This was so firstly because it was unnecessary due to advertising that arrived as a continuous source of income since 1957 and, secondly, because public financing came directly from the State (Iosifidis, 2007) that did not want to give away any portion of authority and control by letting any commercial television enter the market until January 1990 (Bustamante, 2010). This aroused the terrible suspicion that the political establishment would be closely related to the financing, support and continuity of public service media, as international researchers have regularly underlined (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). But the truth is that TVE had a very original working model. On one hand it did not have a separate content production division for cultural/educational programs, as some European countries like Sweden and UK. Therefore, and even though it had very popular live musical shows and programs related to entertainment and leisure as *cultural contests* (Palacio, 2005), it began to introduce some U.S. television series like "Lieutenant Columbo" in the mid-sixties, and this represented a big difference as compared to other public national television services in Europe (Baget, 1993). Nevertheless, on the other hand TVE introduced advertising in public television as early as in 1957, which also did not fit into the "classical" model of a national public television service, and it continued to have the monopoly of advertising until 1990, when commercial television finally entered the Spanish audiovisual scenario. To complete the peculiarity of this system, TVE was ruled only by an ambiguous general Statute created in 1980,

twenty-four years after its first emission, only to promote the continuity of State ownership regarding media.

Beginning and Rise of Commercial Television

When commercial television finally began to operate in 1990 three licenses were granted: one was given to the Spanish group Prisa through Sogecable to create the first pay-TV channel, Canal +, a Spanish version of the original French channel. The other two licenses were given to two important audiovisual groups, Antena 3 (owned by the important Spanish audiovisual group Planeta) and Telecinco (a branch of the Italian group Mediaset) and both started a commercially aggressive campaign to catch audiences and advertising from TVE, which they gradually managed to achieve. In order to survive TVE started to take loans – first from national banks, then from international banks and financial institutions. They all gave TVE the money, since the Spanish State was relentlessly put as bank guarantee. And even though there have been some studies trying to find out the exact reasons that led TVE directors to ask for these loans, there has never been an accurate and clear answer. However, the general explanation could be that the audiovisual scenario had changed substantially with the arrival of private television in Spain and things had gone a lot worse for TVE since the decade of the eighties, with stages that led to a serious decline in audiences and advertisers, which brought TVE to the highest possible levels of indebtedness in the European Union: more than 7.500 million euros in 2004 (Arriaza Ibarra, 2009). By that time regional television broadcasting had already paved its smooth penetration in Spain, hardly harming TVE either in audience loss or in advertising reduction. According to many experts ‘the eighties were years of consolidation and prosperity for both national and regional public media’ (Bustamante, 2006). But this did not mean that they worked together in any way, because they certainly did not do so. From the very beginning the “Third Channel Law” of 1983 -aimed to regulate the already existing regional television channels- was nothing but a copy of the 1980 Statute for National Public Television. But here is where all the similarities ended. Television Española did not share any programming, content or even technical facilities with the newcomers, which had to develop from scrap a complete infrastructure. Seen from a positive angle, this helped the independent audiovisual production that soon started to bloom in the different regions where regional television became a complete success: Catalonia, Basque Country, Canary Islands, Galicia and Andalusia.

In the meantime the two national commercial television channels struggled their way to reach top positions after a long battle for audiences and advertisers. Until 1995-96 private televisions only showed red numbers in their accountability: between 1990 and 1995 Telecinco declared a deficit of 44.2 million euros, while Antena 3 declared one of 38.28 million euros for the same period (Bustamante, 2006). It was been estimated that by 1996 the accumulated losses for both generalist national and commercial televisions exceeded by far the economic value of their activity (Giordano and Zeller, 1999). However, they managed not only to survive during this period but also started to turn things the other way round after these first years. Spain’s boosting economic situation in 1997-98, as clearly reflected in advertising investments, started to provide commercial televisions with the economic stability they had been longing for: in 2000 they had altogether accumulated advertising investments for a total of 1.738 million euros,

which represented net revenues of 236 million for Telecinco and Antena 3 (*UTECA Annual Review of Commercial Televisions, 2002*). This amount continued growing until 2004 when they managed to reach new European historical records with revenues of 204 million euros for Telecinco and 105 million euros for Antena 3 (Bustamante, *Ibid*).

Finally, once it was widely proven that television business could be very profitable in Spain, two new national generalist commercial television channels came into the scene in 2005: Cuatro (*Four*), transformed into a free and open-access television channel from the previous pay-TV license originally granted to Canal +, and shortly after La Sexta (*The Sixth*). The difference now was that all this happened under the socialist government of Jose Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, and that it benefitted two Spanish clearly left-wing audiovisual groups (Cuatro was owned by the Prisa group and La Sexta belonged to Mediapro) and, finally, even though the government had repeatedly announced that there would be additional national television channels granted to commercial operators, this raised the protests of right-wing audiovisual groups that knew they would get none of them. At present, however, the difficult economic situation for the last newcomers to the television market has forced them to become part of the big first two commercial televisions in Spain: Cuatro was bought in 2010 by Mediaset, owner of Telecinco, and La Sexta was bought in 2011 by Antena 3, owned by the Spanish conservative businessman Jose Manuel Lara. This ‘unnatural’ association came despite the fact that in the beginning, and due to their ideological proximity, the expected alliance was supposed to have been between Cuatro and La Sexta (*El Mundo* newspaper, 8th June 2009).

The 2006 Reform of RTVE: Big Structural Changes

While this was happening with commercial televisions, things were getting worse for TVE: in 2004 its debt had already reached the amount of 7.561,7 million Euros (Bustamante, 2006). That same year the European Union urged the recently elected government of Jose Luis Rodríguez Zapatero to reform public media and television in Spain, which he did – even though the application of the rules has only been partial. In fact, some of the urgent measures suggested in the resulting Media Law of 2006 are yet to be implemented, even though the date is still uncertain, like the creation of a Supervisory Audiovisual Council – to prevent Spain from being still the only EU Member State without one– or the recent Audiovisual Law of 2010 that has had the effect of a “counter reform” by strongly giving more options to private television owners than to public broadcasters in the audiovisual market (Bustamante, 2009). But even worse than this open-door policy to media concentration in commercial television (nowadays there is an “oligopoly” in Spain, granted by the Audiovisual Law of 2010) is the fierce opposition that the Association of Private Television Channels – UTECA, by its initials in Spanish, led mainly by the big audiovisual groups Mediaset and Planeta – has continuously sustained against the creation of the State Council of Audiovisual Media (CEMA, by its initials in Spanish) arguing that having an independent audiovisual control exercised by this Council would be equivalent to a come back to the old times of Franco’s censorship.

Concomitantly, in June 2011, the Popular Party had already declared that should they be the next ones in power (and they are at present), the formal creation of the CEMA “would not see daylight” (*El País*, 22 June 2011). Notwithstanding the fact that the Council of Ministers passed that same month the creation of CEMA but only to see it finally

disappear. To the extent that it did not even exist in January 2012 when Vice President Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría declared that the CEMA “was neither convenient nor necessary” (El Mundo, 25th January 2012), adding that with this measure “the government would save about seven million Euros”. This was so despite the fact that left-wing television channels were enthusiastically expecting this initiative, as well as journalists’ unions and even the three regional audiovisual independent authorities that currently operate in Spain: the CAC, Audiovisual Council of Catalonia; the CAA, Audiovisual Council of Andalusia, and the CoAn, the Audiovisual Council of Navarre. The latter has unfortunately been slashed by the Law 15/2011 of October 21 and is therefore no longer operating. On the other hand, however, the right-wing commercial television groups (mainly Mediaset and Planeta) keep struggling to avoid any type of supervisory control over their activities, revenues and programming content. In theory the CEMA would perform four main functions: guarantee that audiovisual communication in radio, television and interactive services be freely exercised as outlined in the General Audiovisual Law of 2010; guarantee the rights and duties established in that same Law regarding the “less protected audiences” (children); guarantee transparency and pluralism in all public and private media and, finally, supervise the independence and impartiality that all public media should render, as well as to accomplish the public service mission objectives and goals that have been assigned to the recently-established RTVE Corporation.

But besides the fact – as we now know – that a national supervisory audiovisual authority will not see daylight, other big structural changes were taking place in RTVE. Amongst the most important, also included in the 2006 Law to Reform Public Media, were those that *transformed* RTVE since 1st January 2007 into a Corporation of the Spanish State as sole owner. This implied a lot of structural changes intended to cast off the chains that had tied it previously to the political establishment (Arriaza Ibarra, 2009).

As concerns the debt, it was acquired by the government and will be paid by all citizens. However, there is a clear and strict prohibition for RTVE to acquire in the future new debts by placing the Spanish State as guarantor.

As far as personnel is concerned, those employees aged 50 years and older were “invited” to retire with attractive settlement offers, whilst hundreds of young people will instead be employed with salaries equivalent to one third of a former employee as contracted in the years prior to the reform.

When it came to high ranking staff and the Executive Board, a President would head RTVE Corporation – which includes TVE 1 and TVE2, RNE (*Radio Nacional de España*, the national public broadcasting system), Chorus and Orchestra of RTVE, the Official Institute for Radio and Television, and a Marketing Department in charge of selling TV series produced in TVE and the music collections played by the Chorus and Orchestra. This Director -proposed by Parliament and approved by 2/3 majority- would in turn appoint the directors of public television (TVE) and public radio (RNE). To prevent the previous coincidence of a change of the country’s government with the end of the directors’ mandate, the new head of the Corporation would be appointed for a six-year period instead of four. Notwithstanding these written rules, four years after the start of the *new* RTVE Corporation two directors have already perished: Luis Fernandez, aged 54, who was appointed director in January 2007 and resigned in November 2009 due to a lack of consensus regarding budget and management issues between RTVE and the government authorities, and Alberto Oliart, aged 83, who was appointed in 2009 after Fernández

resigned and surprisingly stepped down from RTVE in July 2011. For almost a year no Director of RTVE Corporation was appointed and the Executive Board was temporarily assuming its tasks and responsibilities through a curious rotating procedure by which each of its members assumed the “temporary direction” of TVE for a period of thirty days. Just recently, in June 2012, this situation changed shortly after the new government of the Popular Party, led by Mariano Rajoy, took office and again decided, unexpectedly, to take control over RTVE by appointing directly the new Director of the RTVE Corporation, a measure that the leader of the Socialist Party in the opposition –Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba- said that it “took us 32 years back in democracy”. (El País, 4th June 2012).

There is still an important change to be considered in order to furnish an accurate study of RTVE, and this has to deal with its Executive Board. According to the Reform Law of Televisión Española (2006) twelve members of the Board should be proposed by different sectors of society, including unions and workers’ associations. The new government decided to leave three union members out of the Executive Board by shortly reducing it to nine members. Five of them would be renewed in 2012 and the remaining four in 2013. The democratic way by which their designation would be distributed would be as follows: the Popular Party had the right to renew three; the Socialist Party one, and the catalanists CiU (Convergencia i Unió) the remaining one. But after the government’s direct appointment of Leopoldo Gonzalez-Echenique as new Director of RTVE Corporation, the socialists decided not to appoint any candidate to the Executive Board at all. “Let them have it all”, said socialist leader Alfredo Perez Rubalcaba, referring to the conservative party’s decision to control RTVE Corporation. (El País, 3rd June 2012). CiU on the contrary decided to present its own candidate and support the governing party’s decision to appoint directly the new RTVE Director. As the socialists decided not to participate the obvious result was that the conservative governing party got four members (out of five) and the Catalans one.

The remaining four members of the Executive Board of RTVE Corporation will be renewed in January 2013. Two of them will be elected by the Popular Party, another one by the left party IU (Izquierda Unida) and the remaining one by PSOE -replacing the prestigious professional Miguel Angel Sacaluga, the only socialist member of the Executive Board to this date. But if the socialists again decide not to participate that would probably give the governing party another member. The final result would be an Executive Board of RTVE Corporation ruled by nine members, seven belonging to the governing party, one to the minority Catalan party CiU and another one to the minority left party IU, while the main opposition party would have none. That would give conservatives an absolute majority, which paradoxically is unnecessary since the members of the Executive Board do not need to be elected by two thirds of the votes in Parliament, but instead with the new conservative government only a simple majority is needed nowadays.

Spain’s National and Regional Television to Debate

Albeit the controversy that a “temporary orphaned” RTVE has aroused, another polemic issue was how politicians abused TVE in the past, and still in the present, a situation that cast a long shadow over Spanish public television and its pretended image of objectivity and impartiality. Maybe it was so because governmental authorities, by a perverse

heritage, acted as substitutes for Franco's figure after his death. Perhaps it just happened as a result of the mistake of letting the Prime Minister directly *pick-up* RTVE's Director among his closest collaborators, a rule that soon became a tradition though nobody pointed out the lack of democracy that this sort of decisions implied. In any case, the political role of RTVE's directors as political tools of the governing party soon appeared as too striking to be ignored, along with the lack of stability that it fostered. Between 1996 and 2004 (a period ruled by the Popular Party) as many as six directors headed RTVE, though it was supposed that each one should have a four-year term. It is not then surprising to find out that the debt of RTVE soared to more than 7.500 million euros in 2004 with nobody in the organization directly liable to be blamed. Notwithstanding this fact, it has not been proved that TVE's high authorities earned huge salaries, even though rumours began to circulate inside and outside Spain affirming that they did. What the reports declared between 1996-1999, once officially disclosed in 2003, was that TVE directors received money in form of "image rights", though not clearly specified, and that some of them bought some programs (mostly films and series) through unnecessary intermediaries, which made prices rise significantly for TVE (Bustamante, 2006).

The level of indebtedness after the reform of RTVE in 2006 – and its transformation into a Corporation with the Spanish State as the sole owner – has not only been cut down to zero, but political influences have also been carefully wiped off from the public national television and radio services to avoid the manipulation and dependence from any sort of national political power.¹

Regional Television Hits the Scene

However, regional television networks -which started in the early 80's in the north of Spain (Galicia, the Basque Country and Catalonia) as well as in Andalusia and the Canary Islands- soon replaced TVE not only in their connection with regional and local political establishments but also as a source of corruption and unreasonable indebtedness. Likewise the number of employees soared in some reaching 1.800 in Valencia, 1.600 in Andalusia and 1.100 in Madrid and Galicia (*20 Minutes*, 19th December 2011). There are, of course, some exceptions to the rule: regions like the Basque Country or Catalonia rank top in audiences and their strong development both regarding technology and educational content have resulted in successful regional audiovisual services. Some of them even have interactivity services highly used by the citizens. This is for instance the case of Catalonia and their "*Xarxa de Televisions Locals*" (Network of Local Televisions), XTVL (<http://www.xtvl.tv/>) and the Basque Country and its "*Euskal Irrati Telebista*", ETB (<http://www.eitb.com/>). On both web sites (www.ccma.cat for Catalonia and www.eitb.com for the Basque Country) viewers can easily find programs to download almost any program and any content to their Iphones, Ipads or similar, and if provided with the right home equipment they also have video on demand services which allows them for instance to watch simultaneously a program on a television set, a tablet or a personal computer.

But Spain has seventeen autonomic regions, and thirteen of them have regional television services for a total of twenty-seven channels. All of them received in 2010 808 million euros in public funding, plus an additional 396 million that the regional governments provided to compensate the losses of public regional television. Despite this fact, the accumulated total debt crept to 1.643 million euros that same year, a sum that in this

period of economic crisis for the country has become “a problem that demands an urgent solution from President Rajoy”. (*El País*, 9th November 2011). This is a very sensitive issue for the new government, especially because two regions ruled by the Popular Party, Madrid and Valencia, have regional public televisions that accumulate 92.7% of this audiovisual debt (*La Voz de Barcelona*, 13th November 2011). And to worsen things even more audiences have dropped in general from 17.3% in 2005 to 11.9% in 2010 (*El País*, 4th November 2011), with the exception of the regional television channels in Catalonia and the Basque Country. Perhaps this was the reason why 37 employees of the public regional television of Castilla and Leon were fired early December 2011, even though this controversial measure was highly discussed in several print and audiovisual media as precisely not the best alternative amidst the high Spanish employment rate (22% in November 2011). Nonetheless it was a better temporary solution than just closing, as the public regional Radio Televisión of Mallorca (RTVM) did in December 9. But the conclusion might be that there is, indeed, a very long way to go before an adequate solution is found to solve the debt, the high staff numbers and the lack of effectiveness of Spanish public regional televisions.

The New TVE’s Funding Model of 2009 as a New Source for Problems

Instability that doesn’t seem to abandon RTVE – despite government regulation and the publicity awarded to the new Corporation – can perhaps be better analyzed highlighting what happened just after the start of the new RTVE Corporation. After three years of apparent inertia, there was a Decree Law for Financing RTVE Corporation -Nº 8 /2009 of August 28- in which the suppression of advertising from RTVE was announced, just as *France Télévisions* announced it in January 2008 by President Sarkozy himself, and in both cases, France and Spain, the reason for this radical decision, more abrupt in the case of Spain since advertising had been present in public television practically since its origins, was to make both public televisions “comparable to BBC” (www.elmundo.es 5 May 2009). Like the French case, all the television authorities were stunned at the unexpected news, partially because RTVE had already been reducing its advertising to ten minutes per hour, even during prime time; however, and also like President Sarkozy, President Rodríguez Zapatero remained adamant in his decision to have a national public television financed strictly through public funding and with no advertising at all.

Funding raised hereto through advertising would be replaced by the following measures, a direct transcription of the French model:

- A 3% tax over revenues applied to all open commercial televisions (1,5% for Pay TV), together with a 0,9% tax over revenues applied to all telecommunications operators.
- To prevent out-of-proportion payments, there would be some limitations: taxes would not exceed 15% of the total budget for open commercial TVs; neither 20% of the total budget for Pay TV; neither 25% of the total budget for telecommunications operators.
- To complete the budget, RTVE Corporation would receive all the fees that the State charges for using the radio-electrical spectrum, as well as an approximate 500 million Euros that would come directly from the State budget to finance the basic operations of the Corporation.

- As a compensatory rule, RTVE would limit to 10% its acquisition of emission rights for sport events – with the exception of the Olympic Games. It would also increase to a 20% its contribution to finance Spanish cinema (which was around 12% before this disposition).

This measure was polemic and caused the anger of private televisions, which decided to take action and protest to Brussels where their claim was eventually accepted. On January 2010 the European Commission admonished the Spanish government “not to use the newly established taxes to finance RTVE Corporation until a final disposition was made”. (www.expansion.com 15 January 2010). And in March 2011 the Commissioner and Vice President of the European Commission, Neely Kroes, took Spain and France to the Court of Justice in Luxembourg for the “illegal taxes that are being charged to private television and telecommunication operators in these two countries” (www.elpais.com 15 March 2011), arguing that investments directed to improve the quality of these sectors could be seriously discouraged with the new taxes. This dispute, however, is still far from ending, since former Prime Minister Zapatero, and presumably also President Sarkozy, were determined to prove the legality of this measure “in any court, be it national or international” (*Ibid*).

Finally, on December 30, 2011, the new government’s Council of Ministers decided to reduce the budget that the State provides to the RTVE Corporation in 200 million euros (*El País*, 2 January 2012). This means a reduction from 1.200 to 1.000 million euros for the forthcoming year (more than 15%), and eighty percent of this budget is already destined to cover payment of invoices. This means another big problem for RTVE; so big, indeed, that its Council decided to meet urgently on Wednesday, 4 January, to evaluate the consequences of this reduction.

So far, some measures including even the return of advertising to TVE (highly criticized by the socialists, especially because 40% of its personnel was fired due to the socialist reform that now is being questioned), the sale of some rights to this date exclusive only for RTVE like the Olympic Games, and/or the sale of some of its channels are still options that could be chosen by the conservative government. This could be due to two important reasons: the first one refers to the difficult economic situation that TVE, as most public institutions and the Spanish State itself, are going through at this moment, and also to the budget cut of 200 million euros that TVE has had to face. The other reason refers to the tendency of the recently-elected conservative government to rely on every regional government for the privatization of regional television, as recently approved by the Council of Ministers and announced by the Vice President herself in April 2012. Notwithstanding these undeniable facts, official figures show that, even with the new taxes that the previous socialist government charged on commercial televisions, these have long benefitted from the withdrawal of advertising from public national television in terms of investments made by advertisers. According to the *Comisión Nacional del Mercado de Valores* (Spanish Stock Exchange Commission), Antena 3 obtained in 2010 net revenues of 109.1 million euros, an amount that represents an increase of 79,6% as compared to the previous year. Telecinco, on the other hand also obtained 70,5 million euros more than the previous year, 45,6% more than in 2009 (*El País*, 24 February 2011). That is why it is not surprising at all that the commercial television lobby in Spain and, through their main association, UTECA, repeatedly state the need of not returning advertising to TVE

due to the fact that “the governing party itself has been sending contradictory messages regarding the future of RTVE in the last months” and that the return of advertising “would represent the end for commercial television, since it has been suffering advertising reductions in the last months” (El Confidencial, 16 June 2012).

But even worse than this scenario of gigantic revenues channeled to commercial television that represent television oligopoly in Spain, the privatization of regional televisions can be interpreted according to experts as the first step taken by the new government to privatize the national public television channels. In the next months we will see how the critical economic situation that Spain is enduring since 2009 will affect the public national and regional television channels in a definite way.

Conclusions

The audiovisual scenario right now (June 2012) is still pending on the final decision to be taken in Strasbourg related to how Spanish public television should be financed according to a polemic audiovisual regulation at a time when the severe economic crisis that Spain suffers will also to be addressed by both national and regional public television channels.

In this respect, the new conservative government of the Popular Party has repeatedly expressed its intention of switching back to TVE’s previous model, bringing back advertising as any other commercial television channel. However, this would mean that Mediaset and Grupo Planeta would lose part of the revenues they earned in the last months through advertising redirected to their channels. Politically speaking this would imply a high price for the political leader who is now under popular scrutiny due to the severe economic situation. A campaign of unpopularity being spread out by the leading audience television channels is the last thing the new President needs.

However, some leaders of the Popular Party have recently, and openly, expressed their opinion against the convenience of having a State-funded public national television service. Even though the word “privatization” has always haunted TVE, as a kind of *familiar* ghost, it has never come so close to become reality as today. On the other hand, for the existing commercial television channels this would imply a high competition for audiences which they may not be so keen on.

In economic terms the troublesome deficit situation that Spanish regional public television channels face nowadays has worsened the panorama, and to this date it is foreseeable that more public regional televisions will follow the shutdown of the public radio and television services of Mallorca (Radio Televisión de Mallorca (RTVM)), or, as is the case of Radio Televisión de Castilla y León (RTVCyL), many employees will be fired as a last resort to try to preserve the continuity of the media.

This inevitably leads us to the conclusion that Spain has already started a process that will affect its national and regional public television channels. The challenge for the new government is now to find a solution that balances the suppression of costs that exceed the limits of the reasonable along with an optimized continuity of a public service. The reason is simple: this option, adequately managed, enhances and promotes pluralism and quality contents. Because, as Michael Tracey said (1998): “public broadcasting is not about technology. It is about an idea, which happens to employ technology, of how one creates and feeds a society and its culture”.

Note

1. Despite these improvements in public national television, on 26 April 2011 Maria Dolores de Cospedal, General Secretary of the Popular Party, was invited to a morning show of general information in “La 1”, the first channel of TVE. There, at the end of the interview, she openly expressed her criticism against what she called “the political direction” of TVE, by openly declaring: “I believe that RTVE is not as impartial as it should be” (...), or “(...) public national television should have objective information services”. She was politely corrected by the show presenter, journalist Ana Pastor, but she insisted on her point of view without clearly stating the exact base for her opinion. The whole interview can be seen in the following link: <http://www.rtve.es/alicarta/videos/los-desayunos-de-tve/desayunos-tve-maria-dolores-cospedal-secretaria-general-del-partido-popular/1083371/> Accessed 13 December 2011.

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